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Jean Anne Bartlett's
The Torment of Aaron Burr #2

THEODOSIA

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CHAPTER I

The winter had been a long and difficult one for Percy Brooks. It wasn't the weather which bothered her, though. The weather had been no better nor worse than any other winter she could remember in her thirty-four years of life. There had been a lot of snow. There was always a lot of snow in Newport, Iowa, in the winter. It began to fall somewhere around Thanksgiving and almost always continued off and on until sometime in April. But the change of seasons had been one of the things Percy looked forward to, until this year. Each change had been an exciting experience and Percy never failed to marvel at the absolute wonder of it all. The inborn alarm clock of nature awed her, and her enjoyment of each season in turn was almost childlike in its totality. She loved the long, lazy, relaxing days of summer. Being a more than competent sportswoman, she played tennis regularly and swam extremely well. Nearly every day she joined the children in the pool beside the patio. She enjoyed an occasional round of golf with friends, and she played it with spirit if not expertise. And on the cold, snowy days of winter, it was Percy who joined the children for hours of sledding or ice-skating. It was Percy who carried the jugs of hot beverages and built the small bonfires to warm their cold hands. Gordon never knew who enjoyed it more, Percy or the children and their friends. But this winter was different. So far, Percy had been sledding with the children only once, and it hadn't been fun for either her or the children. After that, when Linda and Bobby wanted to go sledding or skating on the lake, she let them go with a group of other

children or she would suggest someone else to chaperone, if the group was going to be a large one. She insisted on knowing where Bobby and Linda would be at all times, and it was an unbreakable rule that they had to be home by dark. Percy seemed to have a dreadful fear of not knowing where they were, a fear of losing them or having them get lost, and it bothered Linda and Bobby a lot. They didn't understand the change in their mother. She just wasn't the same, and she certainly wasn't fun anymore. Bobby particularly resented having to account for every minute away from his home. He was twelve, and he wasn't a baby any longer, but his mother seemed to refuse to acknowledge the fact. None of his friends were so closely guarded now that they were growing up.

"You know what I think?" Linda asked her brother one day on their way home from sledding. They were tired from the afternoon's exertion, and that made the sled she was pulling feel as if it weighed fifty pounds. She stopped for a minute and turned to face her brother, repeating the question. "You know what I think is wrong with mom this winter?" But Bobby hadn't stopped when she did. He kept right on trudging his weary way home.

"Hey, wait up!" Linda called to him. She hurried to catch up the few steps between them as Bobby finally paused and turned back to her. "Did you hear what I said?"

"Yeah" was his monosyllabic reply. "I heard you."

"Well, don't you want to know what I think is bothering mom?"

"I don't care. All I know is, she's bothering me a heck of a lot," he answered.

"I know. It's been that way ever since they went to New York."

"Gee, do ya think I don't know that, dummy? So what's the big deal about that?" Bobby cocked his head at her slightly. He didn't see any sense in standing out in the cold to talk about something they both knew already. "Come on, Lin, let's go home. I'm hungry." Looking around him at the rapidly lengthening shadows, he added, "It's getting late, and mom's gonna be mad as all git out."

He turned to start for home, but she grabbed his arm with a tug that nearly knocked him off his balance.

"Whadya go and do that for? Come on, don't be funny. Let's go." He jerked his arm out of her grasp with a movement so unexpected that she lost her balance completely and fell forward into the snow. Twisting gracefully as she went down, she fell into an almost sitting position, so that she was more startled than hurt.

Seeing her tumble, Bobby grew very contrite. He dropped the rope of his sled and bent down to help her up. As he did so, Linda recovered herself sufficiently to grab a large handful of snow beside her and throw it at him, giggling as she did.

"I'm not hurt—are you?" She laughed at the sight of him, such a stunned expression on his snow-covered face.

"That's not fair!" Bobby protested and bent down as if to offer his hand to pull her to her feet, but at the last minute, with the agility of a major-league baseball player, he proceeded to bend all the way to the ground and skillfully scooped up a handful of soft snow, then without even pausing or breaking the rhythm, he tossed it lightly in her face.

"Phoof!" she gasped. It had taken her completely unaware.

"Now we're even," Bobby told her, laughing with delight at her discomfort.

"Oh, you say!" Linda took this as a challenge and was not about to give up the fight without making her best effort to be the victor. With both hands, she grabbed pile after pile of snow and began to pelt him with them one after the other. The onslaught was so constant and rapid that all Bobby could do was cover his face with his arms and back away.

"Enough. Enough. You win!" he called to her, backing further away all the time. But Linda was enjoying her advantage and his distress too much to relent so quickly. She continued to pelt him, laughing as she did so.

"I quit. Come on, Lin. That's enough," Bobby insisted. He was so busy fighting off the barrage of snowballs that he failed to notice the direction of his steps, his only thought being to get out of her range. Suddenly he

stepped against the sled, lost his balance, and fell backward, cracking his head against the sled as he went down. He was stunned by the blow and lay in a crumpled heap, limp and seemingly lifeless, in the soft white snow. Linda immediately jumped to her feet and dashed to her fallen brother. She knelt beside him and called his name. "Bobby!! Bobby!! Are you hurt, Bobby, are you hurt?" But he lay very quiet and still.

Linda was terrified. She had no idea what to do. She knew you weren't supposed to move people when they had fallen, but she wondered if she could just raise his head a little. She decided against that, figuring it was better to do nothing than to do something wrong. Instinctively she bent her head close to his and listened intently. Was he still breathing? "Oh, please, God, let him still be breathing. Let him be alive," she whispered fervently. It seemed a century before she heard a sound, and even then, it wasn't a loud one, just soft and regular, thank heaven. That was a good sign, she decided. At least, it was a regular kind of breathing. Then it occurred to her that maybe he had cut his head in the fall. She looked carefully around the snow about his head. No, there was no sign of blood in the snow, and if it had been cut, surely it would be bleeding through the knitted cap he wore. She sighed a great sigh of relief. The panic that had started to overtake her found reassurance in the fact that these were signs for the good. She gritted her teeth firmly and told herself, with remarkable resolution for one so young, that she would not panic and she would not cry, and she didn't. Never in her life had she been so thankful for what her parents called her "will of iron."

She wondered if she should leave Bobby and go for help. But it would be awful if he came to and she was gone. If he remembered, he'd worry about her, and if he didn't remember what happened and didn't know where he was, it would be just too dreadful for him. So the only sensible thing was for her to stay with him and do what she could to bring him around. She slapped his cheek gently and called his name again. She wondered if she should give him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation as they had been taught to do for a drowning victim. That seemed a

bit silly, since he was already breathing. But she couldn't just leave him lying in the snow. She had to do something. Unable to think of what else to do, she reached into the snow and began to rub his forehead and cheeks with some of it, hoping that the cold against his face might shock him awake. After a few minutes, he stirred. The snow seemed to be doing exactly what she hoped it would. Encouraged, Linda gathered as much snow as her hand could hold and rubbed his cheek as hard as she could. Bobby moaned softly and twisted his head away from the unpleasant coldness. Linda stopped her efforts and stared at him. Slowly he opened his eyes and looked up into her concerned face.

"Bobby, are you all right?" she asked.

"Boy, does my head hurt," he answered her.

It didn't matter. Linda was so happy to hear him speak that she impulsively threw her arms around him and gave him the hardest hug she could manage. It wasn't really very hard because they both were buffered by their winter coats, thick and warm, but it was hard enough for Bobby to understand her meaning.

"I'm okay, Lin," he told her.

"Are you sure?" She wanted to make certain he wasn't just saying so to make her feel better. "Can you stand up?"

"Sure I can stand," he replied, straightening himself up to a sitting position, but the movement in rising that far caused a renewed stab of pain in his head. "But does my head ever hurt," he told her as he felt the back of his head with his hand. Then he took off his hat to feel again. "Wow! Is there a lump back there! Can you see it?" he asked, turning so she could take a look.

"No, I can't see a thing through all your hair," she told him.

"That's good. But it's there all right. Here, feel it," he told her, taking her hand and guiding it to the egg at the back of his head.

She really couldn't feel much of anything through her thick mitten, so she took it off and rubbed his head again. He was right. It was quite a lump. "Hey!" she exclaimed. "No wonder you've got a headache. I'm sorry, Bobby. I

was only playing. I didn't mean for you to fall or get hurt or anything like that. You believe me, don't you?" She looked earnestly into his face to see if there was any sign of accusation.

"I believe you, sis," he assured her. "It was just an accident. I should have paid more attention to where I was going. It was just that dumb old sled. Just forget about it, okay?"

"You're not mad at me?" she asked.

"No, I'm not mad," he answered, putting his hat back on his head. Then a new thought occurred to him. "Was I really out cold?"

"Were you! Wow! I was scared. Really scared. I thought maybe something awful bad had happened to you."

"Naw, I can take it. I'm strong," he told her with considerable pride. "Was I out cold for a long time? I mean a real long time?" he wanted to know. He'd never been unconscious before, and the thought of it intrigued him. He wished he could see a film of it.

"Yeah, I guess you'd say a pretty long time. Anyhow, it seemed almost forever," she told him.

"You remember last summer when Kurt Richards got hit in the head with a baseball?"

"Yeah!" she replied, wondering what made him think of that now.

"Was I out as long as him?" he wanted to know.

"Longer," she assured him. "You were out longer, I swear it!"

"Oh, cool!" He smiled, but the smile quickly faded as another thought took the place of the first. "Aw heck! We can't tell anybody. What's the good of being knocked cold longer than Kurt if I can't tell anybody?" With that, the adventure seemed to be finished. What little fun there might have been in bragging about his accomplishment had been rudely snatched away, and he picked up the rope of his sled. The sky was darkening rapidly now. "Hey, we'd better get home in a hurry. It's gonna be all dark soon."

Linda picked up the rope of her sled, and they began to hurry for home as fast as they could trudge through the

snow, breathing heavily from the strain. Once Bobby paused for just a second to allow the throbbing pain in his head to subside, then they renewed their trudging through the snow.

"How come—how come you're not going to tell anybody about being knocked out?" Linda wanted to know.

"Because I don't want mom to find out," he told her. "She'd be more worried than ever, and she might not let us go out at all."

"Oh," she replied, and she spent a moment or two considering this before she added, "I guess you're right. She wouldn't." They trudged on for another minute in silence, Linda lost in thought. Turning a serious face to her brother, she asked, "Wanna make a pact never to tell anyone?"

"I don't know. I guess I could trust you anyway," he replied.

"But it'd be more fun if we made a secret pact," she insisted. Linda loved conspiracy.

"I guess so," her brother replied. "Okay, if either of us tells anybody—anybody at all—they have to do the other's chores for a month," he declared.

"A MONTH? Gee, Bobby, it doesn't have to be that long," Linda responded impulsively.

"Well, if you don't want to, that's all right with me," Bobby replied, knowing she'd never be able to resist that kind of challenge.

"Okay, a month. But I'm sure not gonna tell anybody. Boy! A whole month." She shook her head, resolving that she would never be the one to break that pact. "Does your head feel any better now?" she asked, looking at him with some concern.

"No. It still hurts just as bad. Everytime I move it, the whole inside feels like it's gonna fall out," he answered.

She thought this over for a second. "Don't you suppose we ought to tell Mom just in case there's something wrong? I mean, maybe it's something more than just a bump," she said.

"Like what?" Bobby wanted to know.

"I don't know, but all kinds of things can go wrong inside without us being able to tell. Maybe you ought to see

a doctor, maybe even have an X ray. That's what they usually do. What if something's broken?"

"Nothing's broken, sis. Just don't worry, all right? And if it isn't any better tomorrow, I might tell dad," he added. "It's gonna be all right. Don't think about it, Lin." They were now within sight of their home and were very much relieved to be so near. "You never did tell me what you thought was wrong with mom, remember?"

"Oh, yeah!" The thought had left her completely after Bobby's fall. "Well, you remember they told us she was sick and had to go to the hospital when they were in New York last summer?" she asked.

"Yeah, I remember. What about it?"

"Well, I think she's still sick," Linda explained.

"Naw, that's silly," Bobby replied.

"It is not," she insisted firmly. "It's true!"

"The hospital wouldn't let her come home if she was still sick. You just can't get up and walk out of a hospital anytime you want, you know. The doctors have to say it's all right for you to go."

"All right. Then maybe she got better, and when she got home she got worse again. That's possible. Anyhow, she acts sick."

"You're wrong, Linda. If she was sick, she'd go to the doctor. Dad would make her go to the doctor. They always make us go when we're sick, even when we don't want to."

"I know that, but it's different with grownups sometimes. I really do think she's sick. I swear it," Linda persisted.

"I don't know. She's tired a lot of the time, but I don't think she's really sick. I think maybe she's tired of Newport since she's come back. She's always calling those people they met in New York."

"You mean the Whites?" Linda supplied. She was much better at remembering names than he was.

"Yeah, that's the ones. The Whites. She calls them a lot, and they call her a lot. I think maybe she'd like to move to New York," Bobby offered.

"I think that would be awful. I'd hate it. I hope we don't." The thought horrified Linda. They had arrived at

the back door, leaving their sleds against the garage wall, and Bobby didn't have a chance to say anything more about it. He resolved to tell her at a later time that evening that he didn't want to move to New York either, and he doubted if their father did. They were just going to have to help their mother get over her silly notion, if that's what was bothering her. He decided to have a man-to-man talk with his father as soon as possible about the matter.

Percy was in the kitchen preparing dinner when the children came in the back door. "Linda? Bobby?" she called.

"Yes, mom, it's us," Bobby responded.

"We're home, mom," offered Linda.

Percy placed the mixing spoon she was holding on the counter and came to greet them in the back hall. She kissed each one on the forehead and began to help Linda off with her wet coat and boots. "Oh, you're so cold," she said as she held Linda's hands in her own. "I was beginning to worry. You don't usually stay out until it's this dark. Was there any special reason why you didn't get home earlier?" she asked them.

Linda and Bobby exchanged furtive glances, and quickly looked away.

"No, mom. We were just having so much fun that we didn't notice," Bobby hurriedly explained.

"We're sorry, mom, I swear it. It just got dark a lot faster than it usually does," Linda added. "Are you mad at us?" she wanted to know.

"No, of course I'm not mad at you, darling," Percy replied, giving her daughter an affectionate hug. "It's just that I worry about you if you're too late coming back."

"I'm glad you're not mad at us, though. We were afraid you might be," Linda insisted.

"I just don't want anything bad to happen to you, that's all," Percy replied.

"But you're not mad?" Linda repeated, looking up at her mother with such concern on her face that Percy couldn't resist laughing.

"No, darling, no, I'm really and truly not mad," she said with her forehead playfully pressed against her

daughter's as they looked each other in the eyes. They laughed together, and Percy kissed the tip of Linda's nose before she released her embrace. "Now go wash up for dinner, both of you," she said, and turned her gaze to Bobby, who looked rather miserable—from his long play in the cold, she supposed. "But, if you're really, really cold, then I think you might be better off if you each had a warm bath and put on warm robes and slippers before dinner," she suggested.

"Great! I'm frozen. I need a HOT bath," Bobby said.

"Me too," agreed Linda.

"Okay, that's what you can have. Only hurry, both of you. Daddy should be home almost any minute, but we'll wait for you. Just don't take too long," she told them.

"We'll hurry, 'cause I'm starved, too," Bobby agreed.

"Me too," echoed Linda, as they started on their way up the stairs.

"By the way, what's for dinner, mom?" Bobby wanted to know.

"Fettuccine with Italian sausage and peppers," Percy replied.

"With garlic bread?" Bobby wondered.

"Lots of it," Percy answered.

"And salad?" Linda inquired.

"Lots of it," Percy assured her.

"Good" was the unison reply from the stairs. At the top of the stairs, Bobby stopped and yelled down to his mother, "By the way, what's fettuccine?"

"It's a kind of spaghetti noodle. You've had it before."

"No, I haven't. I don't remember it," Bobby insisted.

"You'll remember it when you see it," Percy replied.

"Will I like it?" Bobby wanted to know.

"If you're really hungry you will," Percy answered sensibly.

"Then I'll love it. I'm starved," Bobby responded. Looking about him, he was aware that Linda had already disappeared into her room and by now was probably busily using up all the hot water. Quickly he darted to his own room, dropping clothes on the floor as he made a frantic dash for his own bathroom. In his haste, he had forgotten about the ache in his head until he bent over the

tub to turn on the water. The swift movement caused the blood to rush to his head and the pain to flare up anew. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth as he straightened up. With determination, he fought down the pain. He didn't intend to wind up doing Linda's chores for a month, so he would just have to push it out of his mind. He found the soothing warmth of the bath very helpful.

Percy returned to her kitchen and to the pot of sauce she had left to simmer slowly on the burner. She stirred it a few times, satisfied that it was doing just what it should. She proceeded to the sink, where she had left the salad unfinished. She broke into pieces the leaves of romaine which she had left hanging to drain. Then she poured some olive oil and a little vinegar into a cup, added some lemon juice, some fresh garlic, some dry mustard, some prepared mustard, a few crumbled bits of tarragon and parsley, and beat the mixture vigorously with a fork. When it was blended, she placed the cup beside the salad bowl. Deftly she wrapped a large loaf of Italian bread, which had been spread with a garlic-butter mixture and sprinkled with parmesan cheese, in aluminum foil and placed it in the warming oven. She stood looking at it for a minute, feeling just a twinge of guilt. Last year she would have taken the extra time and effort to make the Italian bread herself, kneading it gently, watching it rise, taking pleasure in serving a loaf of fresh, warm, homemade bread to her family, but this year she no longer took any pleasure in such things. It didn't seem worthwhile. Maybe she would again—someday.

With a small shrug, she closed the oven door and began to tidy up the kitchen. The meal was a simple one, and there wasn't a great deal of cleaning up to be done. She took off her apron and placed it on the back of a chair. Then she poured herself a glass of red wine from the decanter on the table and went into the family room. She stood for a few minutes in front of the glass doors staring at the snow outside, not really seeing it, just lost somewhere inside her mind, chasing troublesome thoughts around and around in an endless circle. She had spent a great deal of time doing just that this winter. She was never able to draw any sensible conclusion from the

thoughts and questions that intertwined through her brain, but she was unable to keep herself from being drawn into trying to search through them for an answer or clue which always somehow managed to be just beyond her grasp.

She closed her eyes and shook her head, trying to shake her mind loose from the cobwebby tangle of thoughts in which it was trapped. With a firm resolve she turned her attention to the solidity of the room around her, her eyes alighting on the fireplace just beside her. With a sudden impulse, she began to lay a fire in the hearth. She smiled at how pleased the children would be when they arrived from their baths and found a marvelously warm fire to curl up beside. For some reason, they had spent very little time just comfortably relaxing in front of a roaring fire this winter. She knew it was her fault, and she regretted it, but relaxing was not something she did well anymore. But for the sake of the children, she was determined to stop letting her concern for their friend, Damon Aarons, rule her entire existence. It was not an easy thing to do, but she had made a beginning this afternoon, and she intended to build on that beginning.

She opened the flue and lit a match to the fire. She stood beside it for a few minutes, the matches still in her hand until she was sure it was well caught. Then she picked up her wine glass and headed for the kitchen. She chose the largest tray she could find and placed it on the kitchen table, which had already been set for dinner. She began to load the tray carefully with the dishes, silverware, napkins, and glasses from the table. She carried her burden slowly and carefully into the family room, placing it on the floor beside the large coffee table in front of the fire. There she set up the table for dinner. Back to the kitchen she went to get the decanter of wine and a plant from the window. She chose a small flowering plant in a brilliant blue clay pot. It was actually a Christmas cactus, but for some reason the plant had not bloomed until February. Now it was resplendent with lovely rosy pink blossoms.

Percy took two enormous pillows from a pile in the corner of the room and placed them on the side of the

coffee table near the fireplace. Linda and Bobby had always loved to eat in here, sitting on the floor in front of the fire. She took a look at the setting and smiled to herself, nodding her head. It was definitely a good idea, she decided. The children would be very pleasantly surprised. She made one final trip to the kitchen to fetch some clay tiles on which to put the hot food. Then, satisfied, she sat on the sofa in front of the fire, with her legs tucked under her and watched the flames busily licking at the logs and dancing merrily in the fireplace. But as she gazed at the hypnotic motion of the flames, she was again unable to keep her mind from wandering as it so often did in idle moments.

"Damon Aarons, where are you? Where are you?" she spoke softly to the vacant space in the room. But there was no answer, not even an echo. There never was. There was only the crackling sound of the fire burning brightly before her. "What has happened, Damon? Are you still alive? And if you're still alive—somewhere, anywhere—why haven't you tried to contact me . . . or Claire . . . or even Elena? Someone, anyone. Why, why, why? . . . What can we do? Oh, God, Damon, where, WHERE, are you?" She had been over the same thoughts so many times, it had become almost a ritual, almost a prayer, almost like reciting a litany. The words, the thoughts, the sentiments were always the same. And always she searched deep within her own consciousness, almost striving to delve into her subconscious in her attempt to find some overlooked clue to unravel the mystery.

So absorbed was Percy in this self-searching that she failed to hear Gordon enter the house and call a cheerful, "Hello, anybody, I'm home." Gordon paused long enough to take off his coat and hat and hang them in the back hall beside the children's things, then he made his way through the kitchen. Finding no one there, he continued on to the family room. Spying Percy seated comfortably on the sofa in front of the fire, he paused for just a second, just long enough to slump a little in disappointment and sigh a very small sigh of resignation. He didn't really know why, but he hoped that someday he would come home and find her bright and bubbly and sparkling with

animation—as she was before—well, before they made that fateful trip to New York last summer. But much as he wished for it, he knew it was going to be a long and difficult process, at best, before life in their home was back to the way it had been before that trip. He also felt bad about the disappearance of Damon Aarons. God knows, he felt rotten about it, but he didn't feel personally responsible for it. He simply couldn't bring himself to feel it was his fault. But that's what Percy felt, he knew. She truly felt personally responsible for the disappearance of Damon Aarons—but what was worse, she felt personally responsible for his return as well.

Try as he might, Gordon couldn't convince Percy that it was not her fault something went wrong. And she had certainly tried harder than anyone had a right to expect of her to assist Damon Aarons in returning. But all her efforts were to no avail. Gordon now felt it was time to put it out of their minds—not forget it entirely, just not let it control their lives any longer. But every time they discussed the subject, Percy dissolved into tears, and they wound up resolving nothing, merely letting the subject drop. Gordon invariably ended up feeling more guilty than ever at making Percy unhappy, and Percy ended up feeling more miserable than ever and even more guilty and frustrated. Consequently, the winter had been a sad one for everybody in the family. Gordon eagerly looked forward to spring, hoping that the new and more cheerful season would help pull Percy out of the depression she was sliding into.

Gordon looked at his wife now, and realized that she was so lost in thought she was still unaware of his presence. He walked slowly to her and kissed the top of her head. "Hi, darling," he said. "How's my girl?"

She looked up in surprise, and seeing it was her husband, reached her hand toward him. "I'm fine, sweetheart," she replied, making an effort to keep her smile cheerful and warm. She took the hand he stretched toward her and kissed his palm and hugged it to her cheek. "Do you know I love you?" she asked.

Gordon sank to the sofa beside her and slid his arm

around her shoulders, pulling her close to him. "Where are the kids?" he asked.

"They're bathing. They were freezing when they came home from sledding, so I sent them up to bathe and warm up. They should be down in a couple of minutes. They were both starved," she told him. Then she indicated the coffee table in front of them and added, "I thought it might be nice to have dinner in front of the fire tonight. You know how much they loved that last year, and it'll keep them cozy and warm."

"Darling, I think it's a great idea. I'm so glad you feel up to doing it. There won't be much more time this winter to enjoy a fire. Spring is going to be here before we realize it," he said.

"Oh, I hope so. I certainly hope it comes early this year," Percy replied.

"It's supposed to from all indications, but of course, you never can tell. At least, that is, I never can. Ben Reston, at the office, swears by the *Farmer's Almanac* now. Since he was introduced to it a few years ago, he's become a real devotee. He was saying today that we'd have an early spring this year. He has a big vegetable garden in back of his house, maybe a quarter of an acre, maybe even a third of an acre. Anyway, he plans out the whole thing in advance according to what the *Farmer's Almanac* says, and this year it indicates an early spring." Gordon was aware that he had caught Percy's interest and pursued the subject. "He started the garden about five years ago, and he's really very proud of it. He gets quite a good yield, apparently. Sounds like a good hobby."

Percy looked at him a trifle perplexed. "I thought Ben was an architect," she said. "Isn't he? Haven't I seen drawings with his name on them?"

"Oh, sure. He's an architect. One of the best around here, and we're lucky to have him in the firm," Gordon replied. Catching sight of the decanter of wine on the table, he poured himself a glass and filled Percy's half-empty one on the table. He handed it to her.

"I just never thought of him as a farmer," she said, accepting the glass. "It seems somewhat contradictory. But I

suppose if he enjoys it—if that's his bag, as the kids say—it's terrific."

Detecting a positive tone in the statement, Gordon asked, "How about us starting a vegetable garden with the kids this year? Don't you think that would be a great idea? They're old enough to be interested, and we could all get out and dig and plant and fertilize and watch things grow together. Think what fun it would be for the kids to pick their own tomatoes and corn from their own garden."

Percy was slow to respond. She lowered her glance to the wine glass she held in her hand, and slowly twirled it in her fingers, watching the ruby highlights that the fire made as it was reflected against the glass. She seemed almost mesmerized by the sight, so absorbed was she in the shimmering, changing patterns. Gordon watched her for a few minutes. Then he rose and stepped over to the fireplace. He took the poker and pushed the logs around a few times, jabbing them as he did so in order to build the fire up even higher. When he was satisfied that it would continue blazing, he replaced the poker and turned to her. Percy still held the wine glass, but she was no longer twirling it. She merely studied in fascinated silence the brilliant reflections of the dancing fire. It seemed to have a strange, compelling beauty about it, like some enormously large ruby that an ancient oriental potentate might have given his favorite wife. The expression on Percy's face made Gordon think of a gypsy trying to read the future in a crystal ball.

"Honey, don't you think that would be a good idea?" When she didn't answer, he addressed her a bit more insistently. "Honey! I said, don't you think it would be a good idea for the whole family to work on a vegetable garden this summer? It would be kind of fun for the kids to plant and harvest their own peas and beans and tomatoes. Don't you think so? It would be a terrific responsibility for them to have, they could learn a lot from it, and we could all share the work."

"Yes, I guess it would, Gordon. They're a good age to learn that kind of responsibility, but I really don't think

I'd be much help. I just don't seem to have the energy to do anything these days."

"But when the weather starts to warm up, you'll feel better," he insisted.

"I don't know, darling. I'm sure it's a good idea, and you and the kids ought to plan to do it even without me. I really think it would be great for them," she answered.

Gordon didn't know whether he wanted to shake the living daylights out of his beautiful wife or smother her in his arms and protect her against all the troubles in the world. Instead he merely knelt in front of her, placing her glass on the table and taking her two hands between his. "Percy, you have got to—you absolutely have got to shake yourself out of this rut. Every time you begin to make some progress, you let go again and sink back. It can't go on forever. You're letting your concern for this man take over your whole life—our whole life."

"I know, Gordon. I know. I'm trying. Really, I'm trying," she answered pathetically, tears welling up in her eyes. She was constantly torn between the responsibility to her family and the responsibility she felt toward Damon Aarons. No one was more aware of this than Percy herself.

"Then you're not trying hard enough," he insisted. "It's affecting every one of us. It's not only you anymore . . . or even you and me. It's now affecting the children. Our whole family life is changed. You can't take out your frustrations on Linda and Bobby . . . or at least, you shouldn't. They haven't done anything wrong. They have a stronger claim on you than Damon Aarons, they're your children."

"I know that, Gordon," she answered quietly. "I know it very well, but Damon does have a claim, too."

"All right, maybe he does, but you've got to shake yourself out of this depression. It's getting worse," he told her. She nodded her head. He continued, "It's like grieving for someone who's dead. It's right and proper to mourn and cry. It's therapeutic. It's even all right to be a bit irrational or hysterical for a time, but it has to dwindle and fade away. You can't keep that feeling, that sharp sense

of loss and still keep your sanity. You must let it diminish and go on living."

"I would if he were dead, Gordon. But Damon Aarons is NOT dead," she replied emphatically, sitting erect.

"How can you know that for certain, Percy? It's the most logical explanation to the whole bizarre episode. Why else would he have failed to return with Angie?"

"I can't tell you why he didn't come back with her, but I know he's not dead because I feel it. That's why. I feel that he's still alive somewhere and trying to make his way back here," she insisted.

"Then why doesn't Elena Blakely share your feeling? She keeps telling you that she's not at all certain he's still alive. She can't make any contact with him. It's been eight months, Percy, since he disappeared. That's a long time. She has tried every method she could come across to make some kind of contact with him—and she's an expert in the field of parapsychology. She hasn't been able to establish anything—not anything. There must be some explanation for that. Why can't you just resign yourself to allowing her to do the work she knows better than you? If she needs your help, she'll certainly call for you. She's not exactly a shy woman about such things.

"I can't, because as tenuous as it might be, there is a special bond between us," she answered. "Between Damon and me, not between Damon and Elena."

Gordon released her hands and stood up. He had experienced more than one pang of jealousy since this whole business started, and now, with this confession, it was more than just a small pang. He had tried over and over to convince himself that Percy's interest in Damon Aarons was the ordinary concern for a friend in trouble and for concern over the situation he was in, but the argument was never entirely satisfying to Gordon. Her interest was more than it would be for a casual friend—and after all, she had known Damon Aarons only a few days, hardly time to establish more than a casual friendship. But they each had an extraordinary sensitivity which seemed to draw them to each other, making them exceptionally compatible, sharing a closeness with each other it was difficult for anyone else to understand and impossible for Percy to explain. In the

short time they had been together, it was obvious that there was some kind of chemistry working between the two of them, and Gordon could not help resenting it at times such as these. Shortly before he disappeared, Aarons gave his watch, an heirloom, quite valuable, to Percy. He asked her to keep it for him until he returned and to try to establish contact with him through the watch. She kept it with her always now, around her neck or in a pocket during the day, and on the table beside her bed at night. In spite of his normally reasonable thinking, Gordon was becoming increasingly jealous over Percy's attitude toward Damon Aarons and felt very foolish about being rivals with a man who didn't exist—or at least not where they could see him. So, like Percy, Gordon was torn—torn between his desire to help a man he liked and toward whom he felt a certain amount of responsibility on the one hand, and his jealousy of his wife's interest in that man on the other.

This wasn't the first time they had discussed the problem and reached an impasse, but Gordon hoped that they could arrive at some resolution where it would be the last.

"Even Angie has managed to go back to life the way it was before New York," he told Percy.

"I know," she agreed. "But Angie has no recollection of what happened to her. And she never did meet Damon. He's still just a name to her."

This was quite true.

"Still, she has to feel some responsibility for what happened. There must be some guilt, remorse, call it what you will, some affection, some desire to help a man who willingly gave his life to save hers," Gordon persisted.

"Darling, what feeling would you have if you went to sleep and when you woke up I told you about this man who had saved you from a terrible danger? What would you feel? Nothing, most likely, or at best, disbelief. What can Angie feel? It doesn't even have the reality of a dream for her. It's merely something that other people tell her happened to her; and at that, none of us can fill in the details entirely. It's like telling half a story. Of course, it's a very easy matter for her to put the whole thing out of her mind and resume her life again as though it never

happened, because for her, it didn't happen. But for me, it did. I was a very intimate part of it, and I felt a strange, compelling closeness with Dr. Aarons. I suppose it's some ESP reaction. I don't know exactly, but I know that closeness is real. That's why I've been reading as much about ESP and the occult and parapsychology as I can find. Somewhere in all that jumble of theory and speculation is the answer to how to help Dr. Aarons. I get confused and depressed because I'm not making the kind of progress I want to make. How do I know he's not in danger of running into some horrible fate like Angie's, racing against time to avoid death or—or—heaven only knows what else? We don't know who he is or what he is or where he is—or even *if* he is. But I can't leave it to Elena alone to find him. She uses her head and whatever gift for parapsychology she might have, but I *FEEL* it, Gordon. I don't have the training and maybe not the intelligence she has, but I *FEEL* a bond with Damon that she doesn't have." It was such a hard thing to explain to someone else what she herself didn't really understand.

"All right, Percy. I understand your desire to help. But don't you think it might be better if you tried to put it out of your mind for awhile and come back fresh to it? Maybe something would come to you that you hadn't thought of before. Often things are clearer if you can take a fresh approach. Let Elena take over just a little while. It doesn't have to be long. You must admit that she doesn't seem to be having any trouble getting herself together and living her own life in spite of what's happening to Aarons. Give yourself time to pull your life together so that you can live with this comfortably—unless you're happy the way you are," he told her.

"That's not fair, and you know it, Gordon. How could you think I'm happy being miserable? Do you really want me to be more like Elena Blakely—self-centered, self-serving, opportunistic? Is that what you want me to be?" she flung back at him bitterly. Could it be that he didn't understand a single thing she had tried to tell him?

"You know that what I want you to be is the woman I loved and married, the children want you to be the mother they've always known. We want you to be the

way you were before we went to New York last summer." Gordon sat beside her to plead his case. "I love you, Percy, even the way you are now; I don't like the way you're behaving, but I love you. And that's a great deal of the problem. I don't want to lose you. I have the feeling that you're slowly slipping away from me, and I don't know how to prevent it. I just don't want to lose you."

Percy moved closer to him on the sofa. She held him to her and put her head on his shoulder. "Oh, Gordon, I love you, too. I really do, and I'm sorry about all this. I promise you that everything will be just the way it was when all this is over and Dr. Aarons is safely back. I promise." He put his arm around her, and she felt better just having him hold her.

"When do you think that will be, darling?" he asked, stroking her cheek softly. "Soon, I hope."

"I wish I knew," Percy replied. She refused to give him or herself false hope. "I wish I knew how long."

"I wish to God that Angie had never made that trip to New York in the first place," Gordon replied, tightening his hold on her.

They were still wrapped in each other's arms, quietly gazing at the fire when the children finally came down for dinner. Dinner was nice and pleasant, although not as gay and as much fun as it might have been a year or two ago. The children were hesitant to joke with their mother anymore. She never seemed to be in a joking mood these days. There was a certain somber feeling in the air, which the children sensed. But Percy did make a very determined effort to be attentive and cheerful. She kept close guard on her thoughts, never allowing them to waver. She smiled and joined in the conversation, but the spontaneity was missing. Gordon brought up the possibility of taking a trip in the summer to the Rocky Mountains—Colorado or Wyoming. Linda and Bobby were very excited by the prospect, but Percy said nothing except that it sounded like a pleasant trip. After the children had gone to bed and Gordon and Percy sat together watching the fire die out, Gordon forced himself to bring up a thought he had been considering for the last few weeks.

"Percy, will you please go to see Dr. Keller this week?"

"What a strange thing to ask, Gordon. I'm perfectly fine. I'm tired a lot, but there's nothing really wrong with me." She found the request surprising. She wondered if Gordon thought the problem was physical or mental. Could he really think she was losing her grip on reality, slowly losing her mind? It's quite possible that he did, and she couldn't blame him either. The thought had occurred to her at times. Still, it wouldn't hurt to see Dr. Kelly if it would make Gordon feel better.

"If you would like me to, Gordon, I'll try to see him this week," she acquiesced.

"Good. I'll call him first thing in the morning and tell him you'll be in."

"Are you sure he can see me tomorrow?" she wondered.

"He said he'd make time for you whenever you could come."

"Have you already talked to him about me?" It wasn't like Gordon to go behind her back for something like this.

"Well, I just mentioned one day that you'd had a bad winter, and he said to send you in for a checkup," Gordon explained.

"I see. I guess I'll go tomorrow, since it's all arranged." Percy was a little hurt but tried not to show it. She was very tired and not up to another discussion of her health or behavior tonight.

But tired though she was, she had trouble falling asleep. Her mind kept wandering to Damon Aarons and their very strange meeting the summer before in New York.

When Angie had called to tell her that she was going to New York with David, Percy was terribly alarmed. She had a premonition of some kind of disaster. She was sure that Angie was going to disappear. That was what she saw in the premonition. It wasn't new for her to have these "visions" about her sister. They had happened on and off since they were children. Percy simply had a kind of special insight involving only Angie and danger. The few times it had happened before, she had been able to prevent something dreadful happening to Angie. But this time she wasn't able to see the specific danger, just that

Angie was going to disappear. In the end, she had allowed Angie, with the help of David and Gordon, to persuade her that they could avoid whatever the danger was by having someone keep a watch on Angie at all times.

It sounded like a perfectly sensible plan, and Percy reluctantly agreed to it. Ever since, she had regretted that decision. Angie did vanish, in the company of David and two friends, Claire and Sam White. They turned their backs only for a few minutes and she was gone. The incredible part was that they were visiting Trinity Church on lower Broadway. It was a very old and historic church, and Alexander Hamilton and his wife, Elizabeth, and their oldest son, Philip, were buried in the churchyard there, as well as many other famous people. But it was the graves of the Hamiltons that particularly interested Angie, and she spoke of seeing a young girl in white, crying. No one else saw the girl—only Angie. Maybe they should have grown suspicious then. Or maybe they should have been more suspicious and more protective of her earlier as they walked along Wall Street, where Angie had behaved peculiarly, saying things that made no sense to David, looking for buildings which were not there. She behaved in the same strange manner as they were looking through the church and its adjoining graveyards.

The things she said made no sense whatsoever to David. He merely thought she was fatigued by the heat and the exertion. But to Damon Aarons, when he was informed of her behavior, they made sense, and he made sense of it for the others. It was he who pieced everything together as patiently and as exactly as though he were piecing together a complicated jigsaw puzzle. Then he explained to them just as carefully his absolutely astounding theory. Damon was, if not famous, at least a leading investigator of the occult world, of ESP, of supernatural phenomena and related fields. He did some investigating and discovered that Angie very closely resembled Angelica Hamilton, the oldest daughter of Alexander Hamilton. Aarons reasoned that Angie had been taken back in time by the ghost of Angelica in order to relive a certain troubled period of her life and prevent the deaths of her brother, Philip, and her father. Each man had engaged in a duel

fought over political beliefs. Both duels were fought in Weehawken, New Jersey. Each was felled with the first bullet from the gun of his opponent, each was brought back to Manhattan to die an agonizing death. Philip was killed three years before his father, and his sister Angelica, together with his parents, suffered greatly from his death. Angelica was beginning to recover from the loss when her father was killed. It proved to be too great a blow for her sensitive nature to bear, and at his death, she lost her sanity.

Dr. Aarons made such a convincing argument that everyone accepted the theory—David, Sam and Claire White, Gordon, and most of all herself. From the very beginning, there was a special relationship between herself and Damon Aarons. Two sensitive minds in very close harmony. Percy begged to be able to help rescue Angie, but the experience was so draining that she had been of no real help. The only assistance she was able to give was to verify that Dr. Aarons's theory was correct in relation to the time period that Angie had entered. In a hypnotic state, Percy was able to see but not communicate with Angie. Damon had decided that the best solution was for him to attempt to travel back in time to the same period and bring Angie back to the twentieth century with him. That was when he gave Percy his watch. It was a family heirloom. It had a very special meaning for him, and he treasured it. He felt it would help Percy keep in touch with him.

Percy reached for the watch now. She lifted it carefully from the nightstand beside her and fondled it gently, rubbing its smooth surface as though it were Aladdin's magic lamp and would grant her wish. She held it close to her cheek and listened to the soft sound of rhythmic ticking. The crystal was hard and cool and real against her skin. "Oh, Damon, Damon, where are you?" she whispered, feeling a slight pang of guilt. She wondered if in some strange way she might be feeling a kind of love for this man she had known so briefly and not at all well. Was that also part of what was causing her to feel so miserable? She loved Gordon and the children just as she always

had, but there was something different about her feeling for Damon Aarons.

Rolling over, she put the watch back in its customary place on the night table. Anyway, that was the last time they had seen Dr. Aarons. He disappeared, and they all began the long wait for his return with Angie. When Elena Blakely got in touch with the Whites, she was trying to find out what had happened to Damon Aarons. No one wanted to tell her what had happened, least of all Sam and Claire, who knew her. But she threatened to foul up the entire project. After they had explained the situation to her, it looked as though she would ruin everything anyway. She wanted to rush to the newspaper and television press and tell them that Dr. Aarons had succeeded in transferring himself back in time. She wanted the publicity and fame, not to mention wealth, that would come pouring her way when her name was associated with such an astounding revelation. Fortunately, the rest of the group stuck together and were able to persuade her that exposing the situation at that point would be too dangerous. Every fake practitioner of the occult would want to grab some of the publicity for himself. It would only complicate the safe return of Dr. Aarons and Angie.

Elena wasn't happy about the wait, but when they threatened to tell the press it was all a hoax, she had no choice, really. If she went ahead, she would look like a complete fool. There was a friction between Elena and Percy, as real as the affection between Percy and Dr. Aarons, and somehow, equally as unexplainable. Elena had been true to her word. She had done nothing to complicate Aarons's return with Angie, and she had done all she could to help. Still, when Angie finally appeared, she was alone. There was no sign of Dr. Aarons. The only way they could be positive Dr. Aarons was responsible for Angie's return was that Angie was clutching in her hand a locket. It was the locket Percy had given Dr. Aarons just before he disappeared. Like his watch, the locket was one which had a very special meaning for Percy. It was the only piece of jewelry which had belonged to her mother that Percy owned, and Percy treasured it. She had never parted with it before, but she knew that Angie

would recognize the locket if she were able to recognize anything from her twentieth-century life, and she would trust the person who had the locket.

Angie wasn't able to explain where she had been or anything about what had happened. She did not recall ever meeting a Dr. Damon Aarons, not even when Claire brought out a picture of him. But she had returned with the locket in her hand. That was their only real clue to the fact that Aarons had been successful in transferring himself back to the early nineteenth century. No one could even guess why he had been able to return Angie but had not returned himself. And in spite of all attempts to locate him, to help him return also, there had been no sign of him and no sign from him. But Percy was certain there would be. She knew it. She didn't know when or how, and she couldn't explain it to anyone—most of all, she couldn't explain this particular feeling to Gordon, who was usually so kind and understanding about her extrasensory feelings. Still, she knew it was just a matter of time before she—they—saw Damon Aarons again.

"I will find him . . . I will find him . . . I will find him . . ." And with that she fell asleep.

CHAPTER II

Dr. Keller sat behind his desk studying the papers contained in Percy's file. She sat calmly in an armchair on the opposite side of the desk, her hands folded in her lap. She tried as best she could to decipher the reports he was studying, but she found that it was impossible to make out more than a word or two of the upside-down writing. Frustrated by the effort, she relaxed back into the chair and decided to wait it out until Dr. Keller was finished. From the number of blood samples and complicated-looking machines they had used for tests the week before, Percy was convinced that she must have some rare and exotic disease. Certainly the tests were thorough enough so that if there were anything, however remote, wrong with her, they would have found it.

Dr. Keller took off his glasses and laid them on top of the papers he had finished studying. Then he rubbed the bridge of his nose, closing his eyes as he did so.

"That bad, eh, Doc?" Percy joked feebly. From his attitude, she couldn't tell whether the verdict was good or bad, but she was anxious to have it out in the open.

Dr. Keller paused and grinned sheepishly at her. "I'm sorry, Percy. I wasn't trying to be evasive or mysterious. There's no cause for worry because there's absolutely nothing physically wrong with you. You're in great shape. There's no medical reason for your fatigue or moody spells or your feelings of depression. But that doesn't mean that they have to indicate a mental problem either. Sometimes the body has a funny way of telling us that it needs a rest. I don't really know what the problem was with your sister in New York last summer, but Gordon

did mention that you had been under a great strain at that time and since. Any mental strain takes its toll on the body's energy supply. And then, too, you could be suffering from the midwinter doldrums."

George Keller had known Percy and Gordon since they were first married. Not only was he their doctor but a friend, as well. In the summer, he and Gordon played golf and tennis regularly. Percy and Peggy, George's wife, were great friends and until this winter, they made it a practice to spend one day a week together doing whatever appealed to them. They served on committees together, took the kids on picnics together in the summer, really enjoyed being together. They had similar tastes and similar dispositions. But this winter, Percy had begged off so many times with the excuse that she just didn't feel like doing anything, that Peggy finally stopped calling her. George and Peggy had spent a couple of evenings with Percy and Gordon early in the season, but Percy had been quiet and withdrawn. It didn't have that special feeling of camaraderie anymore. Something seemed to have happened to the friendship, but Peggy and George had no idea what. Eventually, their evenings together just came to a natural ending. George was rather surprised when Gordon called to see if he could make lunch one day and even more surprised when Gordon began to explain about Percy's winter full of depression. Gordon gave only a brief outline of what had happened on the New York trip. He didn't mention Damon Aarons at all and only lightly touched on the fact that Angie had gotten lost for a couple of days but turned up again unharmed.

"Good God, Gordon, I never had the slightest idea of any of that. Peggy and I just supposed that you were all having a nice vacation together. Why didn't you mention it before?"

"There didn't seem to be any point in telling anyone about it. After all, she did come back with us, and both Angie and Percy preferred that no one know about the incident," Gordon explained.

"Well, what happened to her? Where was she for those few days?" George wondered.

"We don't know. Angie doesn't remember. She wasn't

even aware that she had disappeared until we told her. She's very self-conscious about not being able to remember anything."

"You mean she had amnesia? She doesn't remember anything at all? No clue?" George pressed. Now his interest was keener than before. It was not only personal but clinical as well.

"No. She has no idea what happened to her or where she was all that time." Gordon finished his cup of coffee and signaled the waitress for a refill. He wished that George wouldn't press him so hard for details. He didn't like to discuss the subject with anyone who had a penetrating mind, and George, with his medical-probing habit, certainly had that kind of mind.

"Anyhow, it was a terrific strain on Percy, as you can imagine. She and Angie have always been extremely close," he continued. "She hasn't been able to shake off the feeling of depression and fatigue she's had ever since we got back from that trip."

"But I should think that when Angie was found, Percy would have been so elated that all her troubles would have vanished." George also accepted a second cup of coffee and spent a good deal of time stirring it with his spoon although he didn't use either cream or sugar. His concentration was not on the cup of coffee, obviously, but on the information that Gordon had just revealed to him.

"Well, that explains Percy's strange behavior this winter. But it's not like her to overreact so strongly," mused George.

"I don't think it's fair to call it overreacting, George," Gordon objected. "Percy was terribly worried about Angie. We couldn't find a trace of her; neither could the police. It was a very difficult time for Percy . . . for David, too, of course . . . for all of us as far as that goes, but it was especially hard on Percy and she just hasn't recovered from it."

"That's what I meant when I said she was overreacting. Percy's never been one to let things prey on her mind once they're finished and done with. It seems to me, that's what she's doing now." George looked up from his coffee

and studied the face of his friend. "I get the feeling there's a piece missing, Gordon. Somehow, it doesn't quite fit together as neatly as I would like it to. Is there something about this that you've held back?"

Gordon found George's gaze too intense and searching to return. He turned his own attention to the last few swallows of coffee left in the cup, then he shook his head as he returned the cup to the table. "I've told you all there is to tell, George, except that I'd like you to see Percy, if you will."

"Is she ill?"

"I don't know. But I thought maybe there might be something we didn't know about, that might be making her feel the way she does. That's possible, isn't it?" Gordon's expression was almost pleading as he asked the question.

"There's always that possibility, Gordon. But I can't promise you that I can find the answer or clear up the problem."

"But will you see her?"

"Of course I will—both as a friend and a doctor. When can she come in?"

"I—I don't know. I'm not even sure I can convince her to come," Gordon confessed.

"I see." Obviously, Percy knew nothing about this meeting and probably wouldn't be too flattered if she knew these two men were discussing her strange behavior behind her back. "Well, anytime Percy's ready, I'll arrange my time to see her. Just give me a call, Gordon, after you've talked it over. By the way, the two of you haven't taken any time away together since all this upheaval with Angie, have you?"

"Why, no . . . no, we haven't. Percy had to get the kids ready to go back to school, and I had a big project that I was working on. We sort of had to plunge in as soon as we returned, and then Percy wasn't feeling well during the winter. We had thought we might take the kids away over winter vacation from school, but it didn't work out."

"I just wondered. It's possible, you know, that Percy might be just plain in need of a vacation—I mean a rest

vacation, away from worries and the kids and work and everything else. Have you thought about that?"

"Yes. But Percy didn't seem to be interested when I mentioned it to her. She just doesn't want to go anywhere."

"Well, I'll take a look at her first. Then we'll see. Don't worry, Gordon, whatever is troubling Percy, now that I know it's something real, we'll find it sooner or later. But I still have the feeling that there's something missing from the puzzle. It may take me awhile to work it out."

When Percy finally arrived for her examination, George was determined to find that missing piece. The logical first place was, of course, to look for every conceivable ailment or bug or malfunction. Percy had been stunned by the number of tests that he rattled off to her as a recommendation, but Gordon had carefully avoided telling her about his luncheon meeting with George. And because of the discussion, George was not going to overlook any possibility. He did a most thorough investigative job, but he still failed to find either the missing puzzle piece or anything physically wrong with Percy. It seemed too easy to pass it off as fatigue, strain, need of rest, or the midwinter doldrums, but there was nothing to indicate anything else was the matter. Percy had no real symptoms of mental illness. Oh, she was depressed at times, but what wife with children didn't get depressed by the middle of February? It was superhuman to remain cheerful and optimistic all the days of our lives. There was, certainly, nothing abnormal about the midwinter doldrums. But there was also no certain cure for it except to change the routine or wait until spring.

Looking at Percy's drawn face, with the faint hint of dark circles under her large brown eyes, George could see that it was a study in composed concern. He wished that medical science had discovered a cure to cover all the symptoms lumped together under the heading "doldrums." It would make life so much easier for both doctor and patient. But that hadn't yet happened and wasn't likely to, at least not in the foreseeable future. George shrugged his shoulders slightly. "There's nothing I

can do for you, Percy. You're in excellent health. So there's nothing I can give you but advice."

"What did you mean when you said I had the midwinter doldrums, George?"

"Oh, that! That's a term a lot of us doctors use for a mysterious ailment that usually crops up in mid-February. Did you know that more people get ill in February than in any other month of the year? By that time, the holidays are over, the clean up from the holidays is even over. It's still a long way until spring and nice weather, but people are fed up with winter by mid-February. With nothing to look forward to, they get bored. The colds have made the rounds, the flu viruses have made the rounds, the first thrill of lovely white snow-covered scenes has long passed. If you're a man, slushing through the snow to get to work and coming home in the black of night at six o'clock no longer has any romance to it. Shoveling snow-packed walks and driveways becomes a tedious chore instead of good, healthy outdoor exercise. If you're a woman, it's the time of year when you've had it for the kids dragging snow and mud through the house, dropping wet clothes everywhere, snow-bound days when the children are home from school with nothing to do but argue—runny noses, sick children—by this time of year, everybody's had it. It's an annual epidemic, Percy. The fact that you've been able to avoid it until now is remarkable."

"And that's what you think is wrong with me now, George? You really think it's all because I'm fed up with winter?" Percy asked him.

"Well, no, not just that alone, Percy. I suspect you weren't in too good a shape to start the winter. Gordon told me that you'd had a rough time of it in New York and were pretty well wrung out when you got back here."

Percy's eyebrows flew up. "Did he? What else did he tell you about that trip?" she wanted to know.

"I'm sorry. I supposed he'd told you that he talked to me. Gordon is very concerned about you. I'm sure you know that, Percy." She nodded her head in response. "He told me that you were under quite a strain when Angie disappeared. That's very understandable. The two of you

have always been so close, much closer than most sisters. I can understand that it was a great shock to you to have her simply disappear without a trace. And then to have her reappear with no memory of where she had been and what had happened to her or how she had been able to return to the place where she disappeared. An occurrence like that would prey on anybody's mind, but you mustn't let it prey too long, Percy. You've got to forget about it now. Angie seems to be able to, but for some reason, you don't. I can't help wondering why. It's not like you, old girl." George paused, hoping Percy would respond to the unspoken question, unspoken but strongly suggested. She didn't, and he continued. "Anyway, you must put it out of your mind as soon as possible. Wondering about what happened isn't going to help you or Angie. Maybe she can't remember because she doesn't want to. Those things happen sometimes, and when they do, it's often best to leave them the way they are."

"Yes, I know. I will forget it, really, George. I promise. It's just going to take some time." She rose to her feet and was about to bid him good-bye when he raised his hand and motioned her to sit down again.

"I know I said there's nothing I can do for you, Percy, but I still want to give you that advice I promised you, if you're willing to listen to it. I hope you'll follow it, but I can't force you to. I think the best thing I can recommend for you right now is to take a vacation—you and Gordon—to some very warm Caribbean island—or maybe Mexico, or Hawaii . . . someplace with lots of sunshine, sand beaches, rum drinks, and absolutely nothing to do but relax, rest, and sleep. Take a big dose of that, say about two weeks, then when you get back, call and let me know how you feel. I'll wager you'll be pretty much the Percy of old."

"Will you write that out as a prescription, Doctor, so it could be tax-deductible?" she joked.

"I can't do that, but let's say it's the best medicine you can take. Will you do it?" he asked.

"I'll talk to Gordon about it. I can't promise that I'll follow your advice, but I promise we will talk about it if you think it'll do any good," she pledged.

"I do indeed. Let me know what you decide, will you, Percy?"

"Of course. We won't do a thing without letting you know, Doctor. I promise." Again she stood. This time she picked up her purse and smiled at George. "Thanks very much, George. I feel better knowing that there's nothing really wrong. I know Gordon will, too," she said.

"Most people do," he replied.

"Tell Peggy hello for me. I'll be in touch with her soon ... as soon as I can stir myself into action again." She started for the door but stopped when George called to her.

"Percy . . ." He hesitated for just a second after saying her name, as though he were wondering exactly how to phrase what he was about to say. "Percy, is there anything connected with this that you haven't told me?"

She turned slowly to face him, taking her time, wondering if Gordon had said anything about Dr. Aarons or the fact that she had fallen into a coma for several days in New York and had been hospitalized as a result. It was the reappearance of Angie that had finally brought Percy out of the state of shock. Does he know, she wondered. If he doesn't know already, I would prefer not to tell him about that.

"No, nothing, George," she answered slowly. "Uh, why did you ask?"

"Oh, I don't know, really. It just seems that there's got to be something else involved. You've been such a stable person the entire time I've known you. You're sensitive and artistic but stable. It just seems that there should be a better explanation than the one I've been able to come up with. I'm looking for a missing piece of the puzzle, I guess—still." He laughed. "But there doesn't seem to be one missing after all." He shook his head slightly and closed her file. Managing a rueful smile at her, he stood up and crossed the room to where she was. She was relieved to find that he didn't persist in his questioning.

"I'm afraid I'm behaving like a spoiled child, George, indulging myself by wallowing in depression." She returned his smile warmly, a smile that was full of gratitude and much like the Percy of old. "I'll take your advice. I'll

talk to Gordon tonight about that vacation. You know, it sounds like a good idea. I think I could sleep for the whole two weeks if no one woke me."

"Good. The sooner you can get away, the better." He took her arm and walked with her to the door.

"Now, I didn't promise that we'd go. I just promised that we'd talk," she told him with a slight trace of laughter.

"Well, that's a start in the right direction. Get yourself some travel brochures on the way home and tempt Gordon into going," he suggested. "Let me know what you decide—you promised" were his parting words as she went out the door.

"I will," she assured him. She smiled at the secretary on her way out, and George thought he detected a slight spring to her walk that hadn't been there before.

On her way home, she did stop at the one travel agency in town, Bryan's Travel Bureau, and picked up some brochures for the Virgin Islands, Hawaii, and Mexico. Mr. Bryan was very helpful and gave her several other pamphlets he thought they might like to consider—Eleuthera in the Bahamas, Puerto Rico, St. Vincent Island, Guadeloupe and Martinique, both French islands, and one folder on Caracas, Venezuela. They all looked very tempting. If we do take a vacation, it'll be summer before we're able to decide where to go, she thought. She thanked Mr. Bryan and promised to let him make all arrangements for them as soon as they had decided on a destination. On her way out of the office, though, something caught her eye. It was a poster for Charleston, South Carolina. It stood right beside one for Williamsburg, Virginia, an old historic town which had been redone and had become quite famous for the restoration. She had always thought it would be fun to visit Williamsburg, but it was the poster for Charleston that held her attention now. It seemed to beckon her. She stood staring at the poster for nearly two or three minutes, trying to discover why she had been so drawn to it. She had never given Charleston, South Carolina, a thought in her life—at least not since high school—if even then. Now it seemed like the one place she really wanted to visit. There was no logical reason for it, just an impulse thing, and for some reason, the

thought of Charleston made her smile. Returning to the desk, she made one more request of Mr. Bryan.

"If you have a brochure on Charleston, I'd like that, too, Mr. Bryan," she told him.

"But I thought you wanted to take a vacation to the islands or Mexico, or some winter vacation spot, Mrs. Brooks." The request for Charleston seemed out of keeping with the other brochures she had selected.

"Yes, I know. That's what I asked for, but for some reason, Charleston interests me a great deal. Maybe for some future trip, they'll come in handy, if not for this one. Do you have something I could take with me?"

"Certainly. It's a beautiful old city, I understand. I've never been there myself. Of course, I haven't been to most of these places where I keep sending other people, you know. Guess if I saw them all myself, I wouldn't have any time to run my business, would I?" He was going through an assortment of folders as he talked.

"No, I guess you'd have to close up shop for good if you did all this traveling yourself. It must be tempting, though," Percy remarked pleasantly.

"Not really. I'm not much of a traveler. I'm what you call a homebody. My wife is the one who'd be a traveler if we could." He laughed. "She has quite a lot of trips planned for us when I retire. Here you are, Mrs. Brooks. That should give you the information you want about Charleston." He handed her five folders. "Would you like me to put all those in an envelope for you?"

"That would be such a help, Mr. Bryan. I'd hate to drop any of them before I got home. I'm sure it would be just the one we wanted. And, there's one more, while I'm here, Mr. Bryan. I hate to trouble you about all this for just one vacation, but may I have something on New Orleans, too?" She couldn't explain why she wanted something on New Orleans. The idea had just come to her. Well, she thought, maybe Charleston and New Orleans are close together. There must be some reason I thought of it.

Mr. Bryan looked at her with eyebrows raised. "New Orleans?" he asked.

She gave him her most charming smile. "If it's not too much trouble for you," she told him.

"No, no extra trouble, Mrs. Brooks." He found New Orleans quickly and added three more pamphlets to her envelope. "That should give you enough to fill up the whole evening." He handed her a well-packed manila envelope. "Sure there's not anyplace else?" he asked as he handed her the package.

"No, thank you, Mr. Bryan. You've been so kind and helpful. I do appreciate it." Tucking the envelope under her arm, she trudged through the snowy street to her car, her heart lighter than it had been in many months. I should have gone to see George before this, she thought. I had no idea that just seeing him, having a lot of tests done, maybe just knowing that I'm not sick physically—or more importantly, knowing that he doesn't think I'm sick mentally—could make me feel so much better. She was eager to get home, to tell the children that she still loved them. Thinking about Linda and Bobby, she realized quite to her amazement and disappointment that she couldn't remember when she had told them that the last time. And she knew that Gordon would be happy about the afternoon.

Driving home, she turned on the radio in the car, something she hadn't done in a long time, and she began to sing softly the words of the song that was playing. I never knew I needed a vacation so much she thought. It's just remarkable how much better I feel. She was still singing softly as she wheeled the car into the driveway. Suddenly her thoughts shifted from herself to Damon Arons. There was no special reason why, they just did. "Habit, I guess," she told herself. But as she thought of him, he didn't seem so remote or lost. She continued to smile, and she knew that it was all right for her to smile as she thought of him. She didn't feel guilty that she was enjoying this afternoon, that she was looking forward to a vacation with Gordon when she ought to be concentrating on finding a way to help Damon return to his own time. She had a good feeling about it.

Oh, Damon, it's so good to feel good again. Don't hold it against me, she thought. "I'm not really deserting you, but if I don't hang on to myself with a really firm grip, I'm not going to be any good to you either. It's going to be all

right," she said to herself as she unlocked the back door. She placed the envelope on the kitchen table as she hung up her coat and put away her boots and her purse. Then, eagerly, she opened the treasure trove and glanced through the pamphlets until she came to the group about Charleston. These she arranged on the table in order, then she took the group about New Orleans and arranged them beneath. She stared at the two groups for some time before she reached for the first one to open it and study its contents. It was about a tour of old historic houses of Charleston. She picked up a second one. This one had pictures of the Old George Towne Landing and Fort Sumter. One was a schedule of events, which she glanced through rather quickly and put aside. For some reason, the thought of Charleston excited her. But she wondered how she was going to explain this preference to Gordon.

Actually, it turned out to be much easier than she had expected. After she left George's office that afternoon, he called Gordon to report on Percy's state of health and state of mind. So Gordon knew that Percy was well as far as all the medical tests had shown. Of course, George repeated his recommendation that Percy get away for a complete rest. In fact, Gordon had already begun to prepare the office for the news that he planned to take two weeks off. No one objected. It was merely a matter of deciding which two weeks would be best, and where they would go.

On his way home, Gordon took a slight detour to stop by Mr. Bryan's Travel Agency. When he asked for some brochures of winter-vacation spots, Mr. Bryan seemed confused and surprised.

"Well, I must say, Mr. Brooks, when you and your wife decide to go on a trip, you certainly go about it in a thorough manner." He chuckled and rubbed his chin.

"Yes, I guess we do. It's the first winter vacation we've taken, and I'd like it to be special. Can you recommend anything in particular?"

"Well, I don't know what's left. I think I gave your wife most everything—oh no. I don't think she took anything on Jamaica—or Bermuda. You want those two?" He held out two colorful travel folders to Gordon.

"Was my wife in already, Mr. Bryan?"

"This afternoon. She took a whole envelope of folders. She seemed real excited about the trip, too. Didn't you know she was here?"

"No, I haven't talked to her this afternoon. I was going to surprise her with these brochures. Guess I might as well take these two anyhow, if you think she didn't." He took the brochures Mr. Bryan still held in his extended hand. "Well, thanks very much, Mr. Bryan. Sorry to have troubled you."

"No trouble. Hope I didn't spoil any surprise of Mrs. Brooks."

"I won't tell her that I know. Thanks again," he said on his way out the door. "Well, that's a good sign. Percy must be looking forward to getting away—or at least willing to consider it—if she stopped to pick up some information on where to go," Gordon told himself on the way home. He found that he was smiling as he drove, singing a silly little "tum de dum dum" of a song and drumming his fingers on the steering wheel at each stop he had to make. Maybe the worst of it was over, thank God. At least he hoped so. He didn't want her to desert Aarons, just ease up a little—well, maybe a lot—if he was going to be truthful about it.

When Gordon finally arrived home, he found music coming from the stereo. Percy was bustling about the kitchen, busy with dinner. She had changed into a long, loose, flowing caftan of a most becoming combination of pale green and mauve. Linda was setting the table, and she and her mother were chatting about an art project which Linda had been assigned to do for school. There was an atmosphere more relaxed than he could remember seeing this past winter.

"Hi, daddy," said Linda, catching sight of him first.

"Hi, honey." He smiled at his youngest child as he greeted her. "How's school today?"

"Terrific. I get to design the poster for the Spring Fair. Isn't that great?" She beamed.

"She's going to be an artist like her Aunt Angie," teased Percy.

"Why limit it to Angie? Maybe we'll have another

Michelangelo in the family," he replied. "That's really great. Congratulations, pumpkin."

"Oh, daddy." Linda giggled at the compliment, but she loved it anyway. Art was one of her particular delights, and she was growing quite good at it, good enough to earn praise from her teachers—and her parents.

"Where's Bobby?" Gordon asked Percy, giving her a kiss on the cheek that she offered to him.

"He's in his room struggling with homework. He got a lot of it today, I'm afraid," she replied.

"And how'd you make out with George, honey?" He tried to give no clue that he had already been given a firsthand report.

"I have a clean bill of health. I'm perfectly fine," she told him. "There's nothing wrong with me that he can fix with a pill, but he did suggest a rest—a vacation, in fact, if you can get away from the business." She gave him an apprehensive, inquiring look. "What do you think?"

"I think it's a great idea. Should have thought of it myself. I don't see any reason why we shouldn't get you back in perfect shape—not that there's anything wrong with yours right now—let's make that 'better condition,' " he joked.

Percy smiled at him and playfully poked his nose. "I'm glad to see you noticed there's nothing wrong with my shape, mister."

"Did you mention to him about—about what's been troubling you?" Gordon asked.

"No. I didn't see any point to it. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. I just wondered if he thought the vacation might be able to take your mind away from—everything else, that's all."

"I can't promise you that, Gordon. I don't know. I'm sure I can't forget about it. I think I might be better about it, though. I feel more relaxed already."

Linda looked up from her chore of setting the table. She didn't exactly understand what her parents were talking about, but she knew that they were talking around it because they didn't want her to overhear. "Should I go tell Bobby dinner's ready, mommy?" she suggested.

"That would be a big help, darling. Tell him no more than five minutes away," Percy replied.

Percy waited until Linda was out of hearing. "Gordon, I can't stop trying to communicate with Dr. Aarons. I can't stop thinking or worrying about him, or studying about the occult and extrasensory occurrences. But, maybe, after a rest, a vacation like George suggested, I can approach it more sensibly, more cautiously, more reasonably. That's what you want, isn't it?" she asked.

Gordon nodded his head. "That's what I want."

"Okay, I'm willing to try," she agreed. "Ever since George talked about going on a trip, I've felt like a new kind of person. Well, at least I have since I stopped at Mr. Bryan's Travel Bureau and got some folders. All of a sudden, I want to go. I really do. It just sounds wonderful. It's like the answer has always been there, but I've been looking so hard, I just couldn't find it."

"That's good enough for me, honey. We'll pick a time, and we'll just go somewhere."

He put his arms around her and held her close. It seemed like such a long time since he had seen her without a frown of concentration or a look of melancholy on her face. Even as he held her in his embrace, he sensed a difference in her response. She was soft and relaxed once more. The tremendous burden she had carried inside her for the last many months was no longer tearing her apart. Was it possible that all along the answer had been there for them to grasp—so simple, so easily attained? Was it going to be this easy? Somehow, he doubted it. In spite of his fervent hope that the worst was over, he doubted very much that it would really be as simple as this. But he wasn't about to turn down any opportunity, either. "We'll just plunge in and hope for the best," he told himself.

"Can we go anywhere I want to go, Gordon?" she asked, nuzzling his cheek as she used to do when she wanted to win him over to her way of thinking.

"I guess we can—anyplace within reason, that is. And anyplace we can get back from in two weeks. We can't afford a trip around the world." He knew she was up to something, but he couldn't tell what.

"George suggested two weeks away, did I tell you?" she asked.

"That length of time shouldn't be a problem," he assured her.

"Good. And I get to pick the place, okay?"

"You have something up your sleeve, young lady," he said, kissing the tip of her nose, "but if you have someplace you really want to go, then that's where it'll be. Would you mind letting me know where that is, as long as I'll be going there, too?" he queried.

"Come, take a look." She took him by the hand and led him to the kitchen sink. There on the counter next to the sink were the pamphlets outlining the sights and glories of Charleston, South Carolina. "I want to go to Charleston," she told him.

Gordon stared at the pamphlets on the counter for a very long minute. He wasn't prepared for this surprise. Of all the places he had expected, it never once included Charleston, South Carolina.

"Honey, why in heaven's name—Charleston?" he exclaimed.

"It just sounds irresistible, that's why." She hoped he wouldn't take back his promise.

"But I thought we were going to flop on the beach of some tropical island," he protested.

"I know. I thought about that at first. I got a lot of pamphlets on resorts from Mr. Bryan, but my eye caught this one on Charleston, and that's really where I'd like to go more than anyplace in the world." She was very emphatic about it.

"But why?" he wanted to know. "Why Charleston?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's the sense of history about the place, a lot of old preserved homes, gardens, tours. It's not a restored city like Williamsburg, it's a preserved city. The homes have passed down from one generation to another of the same family—and they've been kept, preserved, treasured. Isn't that fantastic? I mean, in this age of modern tearing down and rebuilding them bigger, better, splashier, doesn't it strike you as incredible that a city has valued its heritage enough to preserve it?" There was excitement in her voice as she spoke.

"Where did you learn all that?" Gordon wondered, completely amazed at the amount of knowledge she had just displayed.

"From the brochures Mr. Bryan gave me. And besides, the weather is warm there this time of year, and we can relax as well as see the city. It'll take my mind off other things if I can keep busy. Just lying in the sun, I wouldn't have anything to occupy my thoughts. This will be much better, really it will, Gordon," she pleaded.

"I don't think it's really what George had in mind when he told you to get away and rest. You'll wear yourself out going sightseeing from one place to another. Besides, you've never said anything about wanting to see historical towns before. History was always Angie's specialty. Why don't we save Charleston for another time and go to—oh, Jamaica?"

"Gordon, you promised. I really don't want to go to Jamaica."

"Then why don't we do something really crazy! Let me see if I can swing it so we can go to Greece. The Greek islands are filled with history, even older than Charleston, and they're warmer, too, I'll bet. That would be a marvelous trip for both of us. The beaches are supposed to be unbelievable. It'll be a different culture, different world—a complete change. What do you say, honey?"

"Right now, I'd really prefer to go to Charleston, Gordon," Percy replied quietly but firmly.

With the arrival of Linda and Bobby for supper, they left the discussion unfinished. Percy kept up her cheerful disposition throughout dinner. She was determined not to lose whatever improvement she had gained. After dinner, Bobby retired to his room to finish the homework. He declined the offer of help that Gordon volunteered. This was just something that he had to work on himself, he informed his father. It wasn't very difficult, it just took a lot of time. Thus rebuffed, Gordon retired to the family room to read the evening paper. Linda and Percy set about cleaning up the dinner dishes. Every so often Gordon could catch a bit of conversation between the two girls. "Try orange and yellow," Percy suggested at one point. A minute or two later, he heard Linda say that something

was "too big." He gathered that they were discussing Linda's school project and decided that it was nice to have Percy on the way back.

"Charleston is a funny choice," he told himself, "but if she really wants to go there, why not?"

In the end, they agreed to spend only one week in Charleston. That would be long enough to satisfy Percy's curiosity about the city, and it would still give them a second week to spend at some island resort to satisfy Gordon. They finally settled on Jamaica for the second week. It would be an easy plane flight, not too long; and it had all the things they required for a good rest—good food, good beaches, good weather, and they hoped it wouldn't be overrun with tourists. It seemed like a perfect solution.

Percy set about arranging for Mrs. Purcell to stay with the children for the length of time they would be gone. After that was settled, Gordon informed the office that he would be away for a two-week vacation, and the last two weeks in March fit in with everybody's schedule. Percy immediately began to prepare for the trip. She bought new toothbrushes and swim suits for herself and Gordon, and some extra shorts and sport shirts for herself. As the time grew nearer, she found that she was very excited about the trip. Even Linda and Bobby could feel the change in her, and they were glad their parents had decided to go away for awhile.

"Mommy's been a lot more cheerful since they decided to go away. She's fun to be with again—most of the time," Linda confided to Bobby one day on their way home from school.

"Yeah. I guess she was just awful tired. Do ya wish we were going with them?" he asked her.

"No. I'd get bored just looking at old houses and resting on a beach. I'd rather go sometime when they were doing something interesting."

"Yeah. I think so, too. Besides, Mrs. Purcell lets us get away with a lot more than mom and dad do. It'll be a kind of vacation for us, too." He liked that thought.

"As long as they're not going back to New York, I don't mind staying home. But I'd probably worry if they were going back there," Linda admitted somewhat

timidly, hoping Bobby wouldn't make fun of her for feeling so anxious.

"I'm glad they're not going back there, too. I'd want to go along just to guard mom, I guess. Anyhow, it's better this way. Think of all the homework we'd have to make up if we were out of school for two whole weeks."

"Yukkkkkk. It'd be awful to go on vacation for two whole weeks with nothing good to do but just be bored, and then to have to come back home and catch up on all that school work we missed—who needs it? Yukkkk."

"It wouldn't be so bad if they were going to Disneyland. I'd go along if they were gonna be going there. Boy," Bobby added.

"Who wouldn't!" Linda exclaimed.

"That'd be worth missing school for—homework or no homework," Bobby said.

Even Angie was pleased that her sister had decided to go away for a rest. She felt guilty about Percy's winter of depression and anxiety and more so because she couldn't share it. The whole experience in New York was beyond reality for her, and she had never been able to grasp the fact that she was actually involved in anything unusual. Still, she loved Percy and was disturbed at her withdrawal from the life and friends she had known. David insisted that it was just a matter of time until Percy would come around. Now that she and Gordon were taking a vacation, he was certain that he had been right all along. Good, practical David, now that it was all over, had little difficulty slipping back into his matter-of-fact world of science.

"For the life of me, I can't imagine why you would select Charleston, Percy," Angie told her sister one afternoon as they sat in Percy's blue-and-white kitchen having coffee together. "Charleston seems more like someplace I would choose than you. But I would think of it more as a sightseeing excursion than an actual midwinter vacation spot."

"I suppose so," Percy agreed. "It's just that of all the places we considered, Charleston appealed to me the most. But we did agree to finish off with a week in Jamaica before we come home."

"And Gordon really offered to take you to Greece?"

"Yes, he did."

"That's what I would have picked, I think."

"Oh, I don't know. That would be more expensive than we should try this year. Maybe next year, who knows?" Percy shrugged her shoulders. "Anyhow, it's all settled, and we're leaving in a couple of weeks. Now tell me, how's the painting business?"

"Oh, sis, it's just marvelous. I've been asked to do two paintings for the new library in Clarkstown and another one for a new restaurant in Des Moines. If they're happy with what I turn out for them, they may want several. I've sold four so far this month, so things are really looking up. Did I tell you that Mary Garrett and Pam Greenley and I have decided to go ahead and open that gallery we've been talking about for so long? Mary found a perfect spot for it—an old barn, beside the Homestead Restaurant. Remember that building?"

"Certainly. What a beautiful spot that is," Percy agreed.

"And there's an antique shop that's going to take over the other old building on the property. I think it's going to be terrific," Angie told her.

"When do you think you'll be opening?"

"In the spring—late spring, I suppose," Angie replied. "They're not going to be able to start work on remodeling for several weeks. The three husbands are going to take some time off and do most of the work. So cross your fingers that it gets finished, never mind when. But they're all pretty handy with tools. And then we girls are going to do the decorating. It's the only way we can afford to go into the venture."

"You'll be successful, I know you will," Percy told her.

"Well, we hope so," Angie replied as she stood up and began to put on her coat. "Are you going to be able to spend an evening with us before you leave? I'll find the time if you'll find the time." They had seen very little of each other this winter, and Angie missed the close relationship that had always been theirs, and she hoped to make up for the lack of it now that Percy seemed to be pulling herself together.

Percy opened her mouth to decline the invitation, but she thought better of it. She had started on the road to being socially active once again, and she would have to keep working at it. Being a recluse had become a habit she must break. Besides, she really did enjoy being with Angie and David. She relaxed a bit and smiled as she replied, "Of course, Angie, of course, we will. Let me ask Gordon what night would be best for him. He's working long hours to get things in shape before we leave. He and Jim Brewster are working to coordinate a big project, and Jim is going to take over while we're away. I'll give you a call after I talk to Gordon."

"Anything I can do to help you get ready? Anything of mine you want to borrow—not that I have all that much to loan you," Angie said as she made her way to the door.

"Thanks for the offer, but things are pretty well under control. You might give Mrs. Purcell a call every few days, if you would," Percy suggested.

"Sure thing. Don't forget to give me a call about when you'll be over."

"I won't forget," Percy said, waving to her sister as she climbed into the car and headed out the driveway.

Percy shivered a little from the cold and closed the door as soon as Angie's car disappeared. She picked up the coffee cups and put them in the sink. She was determined to be cheerful and casual, but somewhere deep inside her was an uncomfortable feeling which told her she ought to feel at least a little bit guilty about going off on a vacation with Gordon while Damon Aarons was—well, heaven alone knew where Damon Aarons was. But she didn't—not really—and she felt a trifle guilty about that.

CHAPTER III

Damon Aarons had not anticipated that his transfer back in time to the year 1804 would result in his becoming Aaron Burr. It was, of course, a most ironic twist of fate that somewhere in the great shadowy void between his own time and that of the early nineteenth century he had encountered the spirit of Aaron Burr, and they had become one and the same. The irony was particularly bitter because the young woman he needed to rescue had been enveloped by the spirit of Angelica Hamilton. Although Burr and Hamilton at one time were close friends, when they were younger and each was building his reputation as a lawyer, they no longer were, and hadn't been for several years, by the time Damon Aarons materialized. As they began to engage in politics, their philosophies caused them to drift apart, and the opposition of Hamilton to Burr's effort to become President instead of Thomas Jefferson left Burr with hostile feelings toward his former friend. Each disliked and distrusted the other, and those sentiments grew ever greater, widening the rift between them. This antagonism made Dr. Aaron's task of recovering Angie Browning from the being of Angelica Hamilton a particularly touchy and difficult one. He assumed that if he were able to transfer himself back in time, there would be certain difficulties to confront him, but he never once suspected that he would be reembodied as someone with the brilliant intellect and strong will of Aaron Burr. A lesser man would have been his own choosing, but there was no way to control such matters. As it was, not only was his own intellect intact but also

Burr's. They were two minds using the same body, each constantly striving for control.

Somewhere in his lifetime, Aaron Burr had failed at something of great importance to him. He had seized upon the being of Damon Aarons as it moved through the murky darkness of time and space from one century to the previous one. Now Aaron Burr meant to live that part of his life again; he meant to win, to succeed this time; and he was not willing to relinquish the being of Dr. Aarons until he had accomplished this purpose. It was all Aarons had been able to manage to transmit Angie Browning back to her own time just before Angelica Hamilton lost her sanity. He thought she had been able to return successfully; at least, he was sure that the two beings were separated and hoped fervently that Angie had made it back to her own life without him. He struggled to return with her, but the mind of Aaron Burr surged to the fore and Aarons was overwhelmed by a head pain of such tremendous blinding force that he could not persist against it. Now the two men were in persistent conflict for supremacy within the one body they shared. Damon Aarons realized that he must bide his time until he was able to accomplish his return.

Through means of thought, he had attempted to make contact with Angie's sister, Percy Brooks, and with his friends, Claire and Sam White, who were still in the twentieth century, but he hadn't been able to receive any thoughtwaves from them in return. He was most disappointed not to be able to reach Percy. From the moment they met, he was aware of the particularly receptive mind open to extrasensory phenomena. He had given her his watch, an heirloom, a link with the past and a possession he treasured, hoping that it would establish a connection between them, but it seemed that all his attempts to reach her had failed. In desperation, he even tried to communicate with Elena Blakely, who had been his friend and associate for a very long time and had worked closely with him on many cases involving the occult. Even if she had not yet been informed of his part in the disappearance of Angie Browning, it might be possible to establish an interchange with her. However, he suspected that even his at-

tempts to reach Elena were unfulfilled and that he would be destined to remain in the person of Aaron Burr indefinitely. Damon Aarons regretted that he was not more the avid student of history so that he would be better prepared for what lay ahead of him in the life of Aaron Burr. He felt he would be more equipped to fight for his own person if he knew what to expect, and possibly could make an effort to circumvent it. At the moment, he could only strive to remain placid but alert and allow the personality of Burr to direct their lives until the moment arrived when he could escape.

The thought of escape brought Burr abruptly back to the moment at hand, for that was exactly what they were doing. They were escaping from New York, from the warrant for his arrest as a murderer; he was wanted for the murder of Alexander Hamilton. That, of course, was total absurdity. He was no murderer. The duel had been carried out according to the rules that gentlemen observed. It had been fought with Hamilton's own choice of pistols, in fact. Still, when Alexander Hamilton finally expired, after considerable suffering, it was true, the country grieved for him as for a fallen hero. Burr regretted that his former friend had suffered so greatly, and regretted even more that he was mortally wounded, but he was not the first man to kill his opponent in a duel of honor—nor would he be the last, he was certain. Still, for some reason, he was branded a murderer.

In spite of the fact that he was still the Vice-President of the country, the sentiments and sensibilities of most of the people of the state of New York were so inflamed against him as to wish him imprisoned—or worse still, executed. This had been a difficult fact for him to grasp, and at first he refused to believe that anyone would actually mean to do him harm, but the rumors of mobs intending to take violent action against him and his property were so constant that finally he allowed the judgment of his friends to prevail, and he agreed to take refuge elsewhere. Like a thief skulking away in the dead of night, the Vice-President of the United States left his home, the estate of Richmond Hill, under cover of darkness and boarded a barge to carry him across the Hudson River to

safety. Aaron Burr sat on the barge watching the sun rise over his former home and climb to its zenith in the sky as the bargemen skillfully manipulated the barge through the familiar waters and into the Kill Van Kull, making slow and steady progress on its journey toward Perth Amboy and the home of Commodore Truxton. The commodore had sent Burr an invitation to visit with him, assuring the Vice-President of a suitable welcome. Burr had received the invitation with considerable pleasure because Thomas Truxton had been a friend of Hamilton as well. Burr was pleased to discover that his friendship with Truxton had not been buried with Hamilton.

As the barge approached the shore, Burr was able to make out the figure of his friend crossing the broad expanse of lawn that spread from his house down to the landing. Truxton arrived at the landing as the two bargemen were lashing up. Burr was pleased to see that his friend had a smile on his face and extended his hand in greeting.

"It is a welcome sight to see that you are well and in good spirits, my friend," Truxton greeted him, grasping his hand warmly. "I am glad of that."

"Thank you, Thomas. Also, I thank you for the invitation to visit you," Burr replied. "I have not been entirely overwhelmed with social engagements of late," he added with a diffident smile.

"You have been my friend for a goodly time. I do not value friendship lightly, Aaron. Friendship, unlike these summer flowers, does not spring to bloom in the warmth of pleasant, sunny days, only to wither with the first frosty blast of misfortune. It is in time of need that true friendship shows its worth."

Aaron Burr looked about him at the border of summer flowers running in a riotous path of color from the dock to the house. They were happy colors, and he had need of happy thoughts. It cheered him to think that his companion's friendship was promised to outlast these charming blossoms. He clapped Truxton on the arm.

"For that declaration, again I must thank you, Thomas. You have placed me greatly in your debt. It warms me to know that you do not blame me as so many others do.

Just how long this sort of persecution against me may endure cannot be conjectured. Surely, you know that the authorities have been hounding certain of my friends, hoping that they can be pressured into making some statement of accusation against me. My dear friend, Van Ness, is even now hiding in my own townhouse, which the authorities suppose to be unoccupied. What food and water he has is brought to him furtively in the dead of night, as to a common thief in hiding. He dare not show his face. I only pray that they do not seize that property to sell as they have threatened to do with Richmond Hill. But I do not believe they will dare. That would be totally illegal, you know. I trust that good, sound legal judgment will prevent such predatory despoilation. When the ferment has subsided, surely then public opinion will again resume its proper responsible course and come to the reasonable conclusion that I did nothing wrong. In the meantime, I value even more dearly those friends, like yourself, who remain true at their own risk."

They had arrived at the house, and Commodore Truxton climbed the steps to the porch which ran the length of the house in front, facing the river. He turned to his friend and stated frankly, "While I offer you my continuing friendship and support, I must tell you candidly that I regret most deeply the incident which has brought you to your present state. Hamilton was also my friend, and I lament his death as much as I could the death of a brother of equal talents and worth to human society. I would offer him an equal measure of my assistance were he standing here in your place today."

"I respect you for that admission, sir, and value your friendship all the more for your honesty. You are a man of no small honor," Burr replied. They entered the house together and in silence.

"I wish you to feel that this is your house, Aaron, for as long as you deem it necessary or desirable," Truxton told him as they stood in the broad front hall.

"If it will not place too great a strain on your cook, Thomas, I would most appreciate a dish of good, strong, hot coffee, for the river crossing was long and taxing. We departed Richmond Hill at such an early hour that I was

not able to partake either food or drink before leaving." Burr smiled at his host. Hunger had begun its first gnawing irritation in his stomach; and although the weather was quite warm, it being late July, he felt the need of some hot food to revive his flagging energies. It was now close to noon, and he was unaccustomed to being without food for such a length of time.

"Please forgive me, sir, I am a poor host, indeed. Of course you must eat! And I'm sure you would relish being allowed to refresh yourself after such a trip. While you're about it, I will tell the women in the kitchen to prepare you a hearty meal." Opening the door to a bedroom at the front of the second floor, Truxton added, "I think you will find this room comfortable, Aaron. It has a pleasant view of the river, which provides an agreeable breeze of some coolness in the evening." He indicated the large window to the right. "Ah, good! I see Elias has brought your cases here for you already. I will leave you then, Aaron, and supervise your meal myself. If you want for anything, you have but to ask." Truxton closed the door quietly as he left.

Aaron looked about him at the room which was to be his temporary home. It was sparsely furnished with a bed, a large chest, and an ample desk and chair. Beside the bed there was a washstand with several towels, fresh and sweet smelling, and a large ironstone pitcher filled with fresh, cool water and a wash bowl. The room was light, neat, and comfortable. It shone with cleanliness. He removed his jacket and loosened the first few buttons on his shirt. Even at this hour, the air was muggy and humid. The day promised to be oppressively hot. Living on a river estate had its blessings, but it also had certain disadvantages. The same flowing waters which cooled the breezes of evening cast a muggy, steamy heat during the day, particularly during the months of July and August. But no matter, Aaron Burr was grateful for the refuge and the opportunity to consider his plans for the future without the ever-present threat of being apprehended. It was more and more certain that he would never be able to obtain a fair and just trial in New York at the present time.

He poured the clean, clear water from the pitcher into the basin beside it and leisurely washed his hands. Then he splashed his face and neck with water and patted his face with the towel. The coolness began to revive his spirits. He walked to the open window overlooking the river and stood there, letting the breeze brush away the last few drops of moisture from his skin. The constant gentle movement of the river fascinated him. "I wonder," he said, "if I were to board that barge moored at the landing and ride it to wherever it would float, what would be my destination? Would I finally come to the Floridas or might I end in South America? Might it even be possible that the capricious currents would cause me to circle the globe and eventually alight in Europe? Or perhaps I might be carried to some new uncharted land where I would be crowned their king." He thought about this prospect for a moment in silence, turning it over in his mind and found that it pleased him to think of himself as king. He found that he was smiling at the possibility. It was a most pleasurable prospect, but foolish to dwell on considering his present circumstances. Sharply, he turned and walked from the room. "I am ravenously hungry," he told himself, skipping down the broad stairway in search of his host.

The day was spent in pleasant comradeship, and the name of Alexander Hamilton was not mentioned again.

The following morning, Elias brought disturbing news to the commodore. They spent several minutes in private conversation. Truxton did not divulge the nature of the conversation to Burr as they enjoyed their breakfast, but once the meal was concluded, and the ladies had retired to their daily chores, Truxton looked across the table at Burr.

"I would not have you think, sir, that I offer you my friendship and protection one day only to take it away again the next," he began. "But only this morning, Elias brought me the distressing news that the state of New Jersey has also issued a warrant for your arrest. I tell you truly, Aaron, I had no knowledge of this when I extended to you the invitation to take refuge here with me. I deeply regret that I can no longer be responsible for your safety,

for in this state there is none to be had for you. You are in danger here if your presence be known, and for your own well-being, I must propose to you that you make plans to depart as soon as you are able."

"I would not remain here under any circumstances, Thomas, be assured of that. I would not have the ladies endangered on my behalf," Burr replied.

"I was convinced that would be your sentiments, Aaron. I shall, of course, supply you with a sturdy horse and whatever else you may require."

In unspoken agreement, the two men rose together. Truxton shook his head, his features crestfallen. "Truly, I am sorry, Aaron. Have you any thought of where you might receive a better welcome than I have provided?" he asked.

"The blame does not fall with you, Thomas, and you must be aware that the thought of having to leave New Jersey is not entirely new to me. I've bethought me of the possibility that other states might follow the example of New York, particularly your state of New Jersey. Like other men, I, too, have a certain number of enemies who would applaud my death. I have considered making the journey to South Carolina to spend time with my dear Theo and her husband. I should dearly love to see little Gampy again. It is hard to think of myself as a grandfather at the present time. I have no heritage to leave him, and certainly no fortune, nothing save my present undeserved disgrace." Thoughts were running pell-mell through Burr's mind, tumbling and stumbling over themselves in their rush to be considered. While he had been aware that there might be danger for him in this state, so close to New York, he had not felt the urgency of making immediate plans for his departure. He had hoped to buy himself time for careful decision and thoughtful consideration here in this tranquil spot, but that was not to be. Not only was he in danger of being apprehended now, but were he to remain, he would place his old friend in a precarious situation.

"South Carolina seems like an excellent choice, Aaron," Truxton replied with a smile. He was solaced by the knowledge that his friend was not without refuge. "I

believe that a duel of honor is still considered an honorable form of redress in the South, and Hamilton was not so highly revered by Southerners that they would mourn his loss excessively. Have you been in communication with Theodosia about the possibility?"

"Yes, I've sent letters both to Theo and Joseph, but there has not been time to receive a reply. Consequently, not knowing the sentiment of South Carolinians, I would hesitate to place either Theo or her husband in an embarrassing situation by my presence there at this time. Perhaps later I shall. Joseph is now actively engaged in a political career of his own. I would not wish to do harm to his career by making an unwelcome appearance. I think it best that I wait to see the way they are disposed to receive me. There are other possibilities, my good Thomas. Do not you look so down-hearted. You are by no measure casting me to the mercy of my enemies."

Truxton's face had, indeed, become so crestfallen that Burr could not suppress a sardonic smile. How ironic that he, a fugitive from the law, stood offering comfort and reassurance to his friend. To Truxton, South Carolina and refuge with his only daughter had seemed such an ideal solution that the logic of Burr's reasoning caused Truxton's face to reflect his great disappointment. The logic was perfectly sound and irrefutably reasonable. He could not help admit that Burr was right in his thinking.

"Never fear, Thomas. I have received repeated invitations to visit another old friend, Charles Biddle, in Philadelphia. If I can complete a safe journey out of your state, I believe that is where I shall stay. If Philadelphia proves agreeable toward me, I intend to remain until I return to Washington where I must resume my duties. If I find I am not welcomed in Philadelphia—" He left the sentence hanging and merely shrugged his shoulders. "In any event, my friend. I shall leave here immediately. That is clear." He clapped Truxton on the shoulder, and together they turned and headed for the house.

Truxton rode as far as Cranbury with his friend; then, satisfied that Burr would be able to continue in some degree of safety, the commodore allowed his companion to persuade him that he should return to his home. There

was little the two men could say in farewell that had not been said before, and the leavetaking was brief.

During the entire visit to Truxton's home, there had been no opportunity for Damon Aarons to come to the fore. The mind of Burr was in such firm control, making plans, trying to resolve the problems at hand and those of his uncertain future. He was a man in the prime of life, and his political future was now buried with Alexander Hamilton. His hope for the Presidency was now totally shattered, and he must look elsewhere for a career on which to build his future. At the moment, where to look was not clear; but Burr was certain that, with determination, it would resolve itself. And of determination and ingenuity, Aaron Burr had more than his goodly portion, none of which was he willing to share with this other personality in his makeup of whom he was only vaguely aware. In truth, he considered this other personality, when he considered it at all, an extension of himself, his gentler, more placid self; and his plans now allowed no space in his character for gentleness or timidity. If he should for a moment let his guard slide, he might easily be trapped, apprehended, tried and convicted—even executed for this so-called murder. That must not happen. He must succeed; he must triumph; he must leave a great legacy to Theo and to Gampy, and in the process, prove to the world the true worth of the Aaron Burr it had spurned.

Least of all was Burr willing to loosen his guard against the thoughts of Damon Aarons. And so, Damon Aarons no longer struggled for supremacy but reasoned with an incisive logic that the time was not at all advantageous for his return to the twentieth century. He was willing to bide his time—but not relax his vigilance—and wait for a weak moment in Burr's resolve, which he felt was destined to come. Then he would seize the opportunity to separate himself from this man and pray that his friends were still making efforts to accomplish his return; for he knew he would need their assistance. He, like Burr, felt that he must constantly be on guard, but had he been allowed the ease of mind, he would have enjoyed observing life in the past century as it was being lived around him.

Burr found life in Philadelphia quite bearable, if not actually pleasant; still he was cautious and wary, although only his most intimate of confidants could detect it. He walked jauntily and freely about the town and rode as was his usual habit. He met and greeted his friends and acquaintances as he would have at any other time. However, now when he ventured forth, it was never without a brace of pistols and his sword strapped to his side. For good measure, he had formed a habit of tucking a slender throwing knife in the top of one of his elegant leather boots. It was doubtful that any man would brave an attack upon his person, but he meant to be prepared in any event.

The townhouse of Charles Biddle was placed at Burr's disposal. Biddle had accompanied his family to their home in the country the month before to make certain they were safely installed comfortably away from the dangerous vapors of the summer heat in the city, safe from the perilous yellow-fever epidemics which swept through the city almost annually. Biddle was happy to have the company of his friend, and Burr gratefully accepted Biddle's hospitality; however, Philadelphia did not offer the peaceful sanctuary for which he was searching. A constant stream of attacks against him appeared in the newspapers. Almost every day there was another article concerning him. There were threats of authorities from New York journeying to Philadelphia to take him by force back to New York, where he would then stand trial. There were threats of Pennsylvania following the example of New Jersey and issuing a warrant for his arrest. At length, even his friend Charles Biddle agreed that it might be best for Burr to leave the city, perhaps travel south in an effort to find more congenial surroundings. Burr had mentioned, in one of their evening chats, that he was lured by the prospect of traveling to the Floridas. Biddle assumed that Burr proposed the trip merely for diversion and pleasure, but he was unaware that there was another cause for Burr's interest in that part of the country.

Aaron Burr never mentioned to his host that he had been visited by another old friend, one from his army

days, James Wilkinson, now General-in-Chief of the United States, who as one of the joint commissioners had just received the vast territory of Louisiana from France. Wilkinson was en route from New Orleans to New York and was passing through Philadelphia when he learned that Burr was also in the city. Although Aaron Burr had many meetings with many people in Philadelphia, the meeting with Wilkinson seemed to buoy his spirits; so that when the time came for him to leave Philadelphia, Burr's manner was no longer that of a man running away from danger but rather that of a man with a purpose and a plan and a hope in his future.

Biddle had no wish to offend his beleaguered friend, but were the truth to be known, he was more than a trifle eased in his mind to find that Burr was eagerly anticipating his trip south. Although he had not divulged such information to his guest, Biddle himself had suffered threats since the arrival of the refugee. While he might expect such reactions from his enemies, who would leap to take advantage of such a situation, he had not expected his own friends to express unbridled anger. Not only was he uneasy over the hostility toward him in the town, but he was uneasy about the behavior of his guest, who seemed to hold secret meetings with an ever-increasing frequency. Burr confided the contents of none of these meetings to him, nor did he discuss any specific plans he might be forming for his future, but Biddle sensed that something was being planned. He knew that Burr had met many times with their mutual friend Charles Williamson, but the subject of those discussions had never been revealed to him. Biddle also knew that both Williamson and Burr had spoken at length with Anthony Merry, the British minister. Burr likewise avoided revealing the content of those conferences. It was this secrecy which gave Biddle cause for dismay. Although his friend commanded his complete trust, Biddle was uneasy about Burr's present actions as well as his future.

"Will you include a visit to Theodosia and her family after your journey through the Floridas?" Biddle inquired as the two men sat having a farewell glass together.

"Indeed, and I look forward to it zealously, Charles. She's not been well since the birth of little Gampy, you know. Although her letters are cheerful and full of the news, I am not entirely easy of mind over her state of health. I must see for myself that all is well—but not now . . . not so soon. I will tarry some in the South before I stop in South Carolina. I would not have the same discomfort visited upon them as has been heaped on you these past weeks for my sanctuary here." Burr sipped the spirits in his glass.

"Posh, Aaron. I have no regrets. The harsh sentiments spoken against me will be quickly forgotten once—" Here he faltered, for he did not wish his friend to think that he was endeavoring to hurry him on his journey. "Once the summer is over. You know how inflamed tempers become in this abominable heat," he finished, quickly recovering.

Aaron smiled knowingly and pleasantly at his friend. "I know. I know, Charles," he replied.

For a moment the two friends sat in silence, savoring the comradeship of the other, neither knowing when they would again share a friendly glass or under what circumstances. The silence was unbroken until Biddle's servant, William, entered the room.

"I'm sorry, suh, but this letter just arrived for Mr. Burr. I knew he would want it before he left." In the man's dusky hand there was a large envelope, which had, at the beginning of its journey, been white.

"That's very thoughtful of you, William. I thank you kindly." Burr extended his hand to William and accepted the letter. William bowed slightly.

"Yes, suh," he said and left the room quietly.

Burr turned the letter over and examined it carefully. Looking up at his host, he inquired, "May I read it? I had thought it might be from Theo, but this is not her familiar handwriting, nor her seal. I confess I am curious to know who has caught me at the moment of my departure."

"I insist you read it immediately; and, of course, you should answer it before you leave. Would you like me to leave you while you attend to your letter?" Biddle placed his glass on a table beside his chair and prepared to stand. Burr raised his hand and shook his head.

"No, no, don't leave me, Charles. I will be but a moment or two. It doesn't appear to be a long message, and I read quite rapidly, as you know. However, while I am reading, I would appreciate another small portion of your excellent malmsey."

"You shall have it." Biddle rose, and taking the decanter from its place on the cabinet, he crossed the room, removing the cut-glass stopper as he did so. He filled Burr's empty glass and then his own. He replaced the stopper and positioned the decanter on the table near his seat.

Burr, meanwhile, carefully broke the seal on the envelope and unfolded the paper. Quickly he glanced toward the end of the page to find the signature. It was from his friend Senator Pierce Butler of Georgia. A slight frown appeared on Burr's face as he scanned the letter. He had not given a thought to Senator Butler for a considerable length of time and wondered what could have prompted the senator to communicate with him at the present time. But as the gist of the epistle began to become apparent, the frown changed easily to a smile. It seemed that Senator Butler was enjoying the summer on the island of St. Simons off the coast of Georgia, about a mile below the town of Darien, Georgia, and was extending to Burr an invitation to visit him there. He promised that if Burr would come at once for a prolonged visit, he would be most well and hospitably received and "your visit here will be made as pleasant and comfortable as befits a man of your prominence." This latter invitation he read aloud to his host.

"How say you, Charles, shall I accept?" Burr asked the listener.

"I should think, Aaron, you have no choice but to accept. Consider that the invitation arrived barely an hour or so before your planned departure. No doubt Providence has had a hand in this—and even if you should attempt to deny that, such an invitation sounds more than mere mortal could resist. It has been many weeks since you were treated by all men with the respect and courtesy

due the Vice-President of the United States. Since you plan to travel south, why not take advantage of so kindly an offer? There is every argument in favor of accepting, and none that I can see for a refusal."

"You are right, certainly, my friend. Your reasoning is sound. It would be welcome to bask in the sunshine of men's favor once more. And, too, Georgia is more convenient to South Carolina than is Philadelphia. Perhaps Theo and Joseph could visit me while I am at the island rather than for me to inflict myself upon the Alstons in South Carolina. Joseph has a very large and prominent family, you know, and it's difficult to say if they are all in sympathy with my situation; although there is no question of the loyalty of Theo and her husband.

"Then it is settled," replied Biddle, "unless, of course, your travels are so well planned that they do not allow for a delay of a few weeks. Even so, it would be a pity for you to refuse." To Biddle, the offer seemed like a gift from heaven and one not to be ignored. He would feel more comfortable about his friend if he knew that Burr were to be safely ensconced in a friendly environment in the South. He did not like to think that he was turning out a fellow man in time of need. Although he realized this was not truly the case, still he could not but feel a pang of guilt for allowing Burr to leave with indefinite travel plans.

"Ha!" Burr snorted a laugh at the last remark. "My plans, my dear fellow, are simply to travel south, to eventually explore the Floridas, and to avoid being apprehended in the procedure. I plan to allow the temper of the times to cool a bit before I reappear in our beloved North. That is the extent of my plan."

"Then you will accept, of course," replied Biddle.

"Of course, I shall accept. Before I depart today, I must write both Senator Butler and Theo to inform them of my plans and approximate time of arrival. In truth, I am looking forward to a stay on the island. I do hope the climate is not too disagreeable this time of year."

"Sir, I drink to your pleasant journey and your safe

and hasty return." Biddle stood and raised his glass to his friend. Burr, in turn, stood, raised his glass, and drained the contents. Then Aaron Burr excused himself and sat at the desk to begin his letter to his future host.

CHAPTER IV

When the time came for his actual departure from Philadelphia, however, it was not as easy or as smooth as Aaron Burr had expected. Although he had suffered no doubts or inconvenient lapses of memory and none of the internal struggles that he had experienced in the week or two before his encounter with Hamilton for the past few weeks, suddenly they had begun to plague him again. He was once more engaged in an internal struggle which annoyed him. At times he was greatly disturbed with what seemed to be another self somewhere deep in his subconscious, a self whose desires ran counter to his own, whose ambitions were alien to him, and whose thinking muddled up his customarily clearly defined decisions. Had he believed in witchcraft, he would have suspected that someone had placed a spell over him. But witchcraft could not be accepted by a man of his brilliance. That answer was too easy. The answer must be that there was a flaw in his makeup which he had not yet been able to conquer, but conquer it he must, and conquer it he determined to do.

At the moment, the other self was presenting a multitude of reasons why Burr should not leave the East. It was not an easy thing these days for Damon Aarons to force his thinking to the fore and take over the mind which they shared. But he no longer dared bide his time. He knew he was out of his element, that he was struggling with a man whose plan and purpose strengthened each day, while he lacked a purpose other than his own safe return to his own twentieth century. And this did not seem to be strong enough to give him the same opportunity for supremacy that he had experienced before the

fateful duel. Then his purpose was to save Angie from the madness that was destined to overtake Angelica's mind. It was a strong, self-sacrificing purpose which drove him on. All his thinking, all his energies were directed toward that end, and he merely forged ahead with his mind ever on that goal. Thank God, he had been able to save the young girl, if not himself.

Poor Angelica Hamilton had wanted so desperately to relive that time in the futile hope that she would be able to change history, to somehow avert the killing of her older brother and her father. Sadly, she had not been able to change the events of history, and Damon Aarons thought he had never seen a more heart-rending sight than the fragile young girl weeping over her father's newly turned grave, grieving not only for her beloved brother and father but, possibly, for her sensitive mind as well, for she was then totally insane. But every time these thoughts came to him, the mind of Burr rebelled. He refused to look back on anything he had ever done and disliked sentimental regrets for actions or people. Perhaps it was this hard and brittle quality that carried him through the difficult crises of his life. It was, assuredly, the philosophy of a survivor. Dr. Aarons also discovered that his "other self" was a man of insatiable desire for adventure, with a thirst for life and overwhelming ambition. These qualities were new and untried to Damon Aarons and he distrusted them. They were qualities foreign to his own life and thinking, and they made him feel uncertain of himself. Yet, if he was to be able to accomplish his own safe return to the twentieth century, he must cope with them, he must conquer them and use them to his own purposes. He must be ever vigilant and take each and every opportunity which presented itself. These decisions he had reached since leaving Richmond Hill.

Although Aarons had been willing to bide his time and allow Burr to live his life without interference, the prospect of leaving the area, of traveling to Georgia, possibly to the Floridas and even to South Carolina, filled Aarons with genuine alarm. The East was his only substantial link to his friends in the future. If they were making any attempt to find him, it was here, in the environs of New

York. To leave this area would be to sever his ties with them, tenuous as they might appear at the moment. To leave this area would make it more difficult, would add unwanted and unneeded complications. He must, somehow, find a way to delay or to actually abort this proposed trip. He had no idea if he was attempting to thwart and change history by so doing, and he ceased to care. He damned himself repeatedly for the little knowledge he had about the life of Aaron Burr. And in his moments of calm, he realized that the likelihood of his changing history was small, if not totally nonexistent. But he meant to do his utmost, whatever the cost. Let Burr do whatever he desire after Aarons's safe departure—but, of course, that was the rub. In Damon Aarons's proper life cycle, Aaron Burr's life was over and had been for more than a hundred years. It was only through the use of Damon Aarons's physical presence that Burr was able to relive his life.

Would Burr be able to change history this time? His will was far stronger than that of Angelica Hamilton's, his determination to succeed far greater. In his more reserved, less desperate moments, Damon found it a most intriguing puzzle. But those moments were brief, because his return was urgent. If Burr succeeded where he had previously failed, what would become of Damon Aarons? And even if he should be able to accomplish the transfer to the twentieth century safely, might the mind of Aaron Burr release him and return to the void it had known—whatever that might be—or might it possibly tenaciously cling to his consciousness and transfer with him to the twentieth century? As quickly as these questions were pushed to the back of his mind, new ones equally troublesome inched their way forward. He dare not consider them, he did not have the time. Whatever the answer, whatever would happen, Aarons would deal with it at the proper time. The business at hand was to find a way to remain in the area and to leave the mind of Aaron Burr without delay.

But all of the efforts of Damon Aarons were to no avail. In the end, Aaron Burr made his trip to St. Simons Island. The fifteen-day voyage was passed leisurely and

pleasantly. The weather proved good and the ship made excellent progress. The mornings were spent on deck, walking for exercise, enjoying the sun before the heat of day and learning what there was to be learned about the ship. Fortunately, Burr proved to be a good sailor and suffered no indisposition on the entire voyage. The sea breezes had a very healthy effect on his appetite so that he eagerly looked forward to each meal. The moments of regret at leaving the East Burr quickly suppressed. The afternoons, as a rule, he spent in his cabin reading some of the books which had been presented to him and writing, writing, writing, letter after letter. He was, indeed, a prodigious letter writer. The letters were all intended to be posted immediately upon his arrival at the island, especially those to Theo, that she might know of his safe arrival and, thereby, ease her mind as to his well-being. All in all, Burr enjoyed the sea voyage enormously, but Aarons enjoyed it not at all. He was disturbed, perplexed, and more than a little unhappy to be so far from the place where he had entered this time. In truth, for the first time since his arrival he began to worry that he might never be able to return to his own time.

The arrival at St. Simons was more than Burr had expected. Senator Pierce and a number of his neighbors were waiting to greet the Vice-President. To his enormous pleasure, Burr was treated to an almost royal welcome. A beaming Butler stepped forward from the gathered assemblage to shake his hand.

"Mr. Vice-President, you do us great honor, sir, by favoring St. Simons Island with your presence. Allow me to express our gratitude for this visit. Rest assured, sir, that we shall do everything in our power to see that your visit here is a most enjoyable, and we hope, a long one," he said.

"Hear, hear . . . Indeed, sir, indeed . . ." came the response from the men behind Butler.

Burr accepted the outstretched hand of his friend. It had been awhile since he had heard himself addressed as "Mr. Vice-President," and he was pleased to hear himself addressed by that title once more. The sound of it fell pleasantly on his ears, and he was certain that he had

made the right decision in coming to Georgia despite the severe doubts he had suffered just before leaving Philadelphia.

"I was very happy to receive your most thoughtful invitation, Senator Butler. I look forward to a most harmonious stay here on your lovely island. It offers me an opportunity to revive myself away from the turmoils of the East, I thank you for your kind and considerate offer." Burr addressed his words to his friend, but somehow he managed to include his neighbors as well without detracting from his host. It was a mark of Burr's charm that he was able to address a large group and yet cause them to feel that his graciousness was bestowed on each one individually. He felt very much like visiting royalty, and he thoroughly relished the feeling.

"Allow me to present to you John Cooper. He owns the plantation next my own, and I think you will find him a most congenial neighbor."

Before Cooper could take more than a step or two, Burr, upon perceiving who he was, covered the space between them with a quick step. He took Mr. Cooper's raised hand in his own and smiled warmly at the man. "It is a great honor to make your acquaintance, sir. I look forward to spending a good many hours in your company if you will allow me. You must tell me about this part of the United States. I have very little knowledge about the South, it grieves me to say, and I should like to repair this lack in my education."

John Cooper was overwhelmed that the Vice-President of the United States of America, the second man in importance in all the country, should speak of learning from him. He was greatly flattered, as Burr knew he would be. He could not help but instantly take to this man from the northern part of the country.

"I should be most honored if you are able to find time in your busy schedule to visit with me, Mr. Vice-President," he replied, slyly sneaking a look at the neighbors around him to make certain that they were aware of the singular honor bestowed upon him. They were. But in very short order, Senator Butler proceeded to introduce the remainder of the plantation owners, and Burr

proceeded with equal ease and facility to bring them all under his spell.

Senator Butler provided for his guest in the most gracious of Southern hospitality. He furnished a plantation house for his guest apart from his own. The plantation had an idyllic setting and came equipped with an excellent cook, a housekeeper and chambermaid, as well as footmen, fishermen, and bargemen, who were always at his command. The larder was kept filled from the Butler dairies, barnyard, vegetable gardens, and fruit groves. It had been an excellent year for the gardens, and the exceptional quality of the fresh produce delighted Burr. Although Burr indulged in spirits very moderately, Senator Butler furnished him with an abundant supply of fine Madeira wine, porter, and brandy to serve his guests. And Burr's new friend, John Cooper, sent him an assortment of splendid French wines and a twelve-month supply of orange shrub, which had been prepared under his personal supervision. Nothing was lacking in hospitality, and Aaron Burr resolved to relax and enjoy his new-found friends and the status of celebrity which they afforded him. Damon Arons found it useless to object.

Burr was never at a loss for activity or company. He was sought after for hunting, fishing, dinners, banquets, social evenings, cards in a ceaseless round by each of the plantation owners. He very much enjoyed the adventure of gathering a particularly exotic honey which abounded in the woods on some of the islands. This he especially liked with the heaps of fresh hot biscuits which were an inevitable part of each breakfast. They were most delicious and quite a novelty for him. Hot cornbread or biscuits were virtually unknown in the Northern diet, particularly in the morning, but no Southern breakfast was considered complete without one or the other. Dinner parties were given in his honor almost daily, and his hosts continued to ply him with gifts. He had even been supplied with a complete new wardrobe, which he considered very handsome. Under such treatment he quickly regained his optimism and good spirits. Once again he was thoroughly enjoying his life and the admiration of other men. In return for the many gracious invitations extended to him, he

decided that he must give a dinner party himself. It must be a dinner on a grand scale. He found that the local habit of eating the main meal of the day in the later afternoon hours or early evening hours quite agreed with him. The habit of resting in the heat of the afternoon appealed to him as being most civilized. So he determined to follow the Southern example and plan his dinner for the evening. Besides, the ladies always look most splendid by candlelight, he thought to himself.

He chose a Thursday evening for his grand dinner party and went about the preparations with thoroughness and organization. He supervised the planning of the meal himself, trying to reach a happy combination of both Northern and Southern dishes and yet taking advantage of the local meats and produce. In the end, it turned out to have more emphasis on Southern cooking than he had desired simply because his excellent cook, Sarah, understood Southern cooking thoroughly, and while he might be able to explain to her what he wanted, he was not able to explain how to prepare the dish. Cooking was not one of the things he had troubled to master. Burr sorely missed Theodosia during the preparations and wondered how she had managed to adapt to the Southern tastes. He longed to have her with him manage the details as she had done so superbly in the days when they entertained at Richmond Hill.

In spite of her absence, Burr managed very well, and the evening was a distinct triumph. Burr greeted his guests resplendent in a suit of gray linen with full-length trousers and a lace-and-ruffled white pudding cravat at his throat. The color suited him particularly well and gave his newly sun-bronzed face an especially healthy glow. His dark and penetrating eyes appeared even more sparkling and full of intrigue. He was the very essence of courtliness to all the ladies and a most thoughtful and gracious host to the gentlemen. He had arranged for a group of local musicians to provide entertainment for the evening and to play for dancing after the meal.

His friend Butler sought him out. "I hope, my dear Aaron, that this is not by way of a farewell to us. Your

presence here has brightened our summer and enlivened our season more than I can tell you."

"I'm afraid you've found me out, Pierce. I would not wish to overstay my welcome. You and your neighbors have been most hospitable. But the time has come when I must consider returning to Washington, and while I am in this part of the country, I have a great curiosity to see the Floridas," Burr confided to his host.

"I would dissuade you if I were able, my friend. The journey can be most hazardous, so I'm told. You must be aware that it is still primarily a vast wilderness and much of it has not been thoroughly explored," Butler replied.

"Then envy me, Pierce, for I shall have the excitement of being an explorer myself. It does not happen often to a man of my years and limited experience that he can turn to exploring for adventure. I mean to try my hand at it. I shall have need of a new occupation when my term of office is finished. Who knows what may await me in Florida? The very thought of it fills me with anticipation," Burr responded.

"Are you not content to pass the remainder of the summer here with us on St. Simons Island? For if not, I feel that we've failed in our hospitality since you would quit us so soon. Surely, you know that you would be welcome to take up again your practice of law in this area wherever it may please you," Butler protested.

"My friend, no one could surpass your hospitality at a time when I sorely needed friendship extended to me. I shall remember your invitation to resume my law practice here. I shall consider it, and I thank you."

"I would feel myself less than a true Southern gentleman, Aaron, had I not offered you the courtesy of my house, my island, but it is you yourself who have won the esteem of the people here. In the South we accept the dueling code as part of the honor of a gentleman. As we discern, sir, you acted properly and in good conscience, observing all the rules of gentlemanly conduct. We could ask no more of you. It is our feeling that you have been the victim of unfair prejudice and persecution. What we have extended to you is but a poor substitute for the homage you should receive from all your countrymen. There

have been rumors, which have reached our ears, sir, that Mr. Hamilton withheld his fire, in fact, never intended to fire, but that was his decision, and you would have no way of knowing what was in the mind of your opponent." Butler left the statement there. Obviously, there had been some question in the mind of his Southern friends as to the validity of the rumor, but it had never before been mentioned.

"As you do, Senator, I live my life in my own fashion. I am true to my own personal philosophy, which is that of a gentleman, I hope. I live my life as I deem appropriate and fitting. I offer no apologies, no explanations—I hate them. But in view of the unstinting and unquestioned hospitality which you have extended to me in a time when I have been shunned by other men, I feel that I should tell you this much about that morning in July—as Hamilton stood opposite me on the field of honor, he tried his pistol two or three times, squinting as he did so. When Pendleton asked if we were ready, Hamilton said, 'Stop. In certain states of the light one requires glasses.' He then pulled from his coat a pair of spectacles, which he put on, and again leveled his pistol in different directions to try the light. At last, with spectacles on, he signaled that he was ready. At that moment, he looked like a convicted felon oppressed with the horrors of a conscious guilt. I, too, have since heard that he stated it was not his intention to fire. But I ask you this, sir, is it customary for a man to don his spectacles if he has no intention of firing at his opponent? Is it customary for a man to don his spectacles that he might the better see death approaching?"

Butler made no comment. He seemed to be considering the sense of all that had been told him. He knew there was no point in questioning Burr further on the subject to gain additional details, because the expression on Burr's face made it eminently clear that as far as he was concerned, the subject was finished. Butler was aware the confidence had been extended for his knowledge alone and now that confidence was ended. He sought for some new idea to keep the conversation from lapsing into an awkward prolonged silence.

"But surely you can't intend to leave before you've tasted our alligator meat. We must have one before you depart," Butler stated with pleasure.

"Do you mean that you eat the ugly beasts? But how can they be made palatable? Surely they must be as tough as hammer and nails." Burr felt more astonishment than pleasure at the prospect of consuming one of the slimy, scaly creatures he had seen on his fishing trips.

"Indeed we eat them, Aaron. They are most exceptional when dressed in soup, or fricasees, or even consumed as alligator steak. You must try it, I insist."

"If I am not to be allowed to depart your fair island until I have eaten some of your prized delicacy, then I shall offer a reward to the first man who can provide our table with one such beast. For I, certainly, will not have the opportunity soon again," Burr acquiesced.

"Good. It's settled then. At least we shall delay your departure a few days. In the meantime, I must introduce you to another argument in favor of your tarrying here. Come. I want to introduce you properly to one of your very lovely guests. She is the niece of Mrs. Brewton, recently returned from France, where she was sent to complete her education. She also acquired a bit of an accent, which is most enchanting. Come, I think you will find her a diverting creature. You might be persuaded to stay even longer than a few days," Butler told him.

The young lady toward whom he was steering the Vice-President was probably slightly more than twenty years of age. Her hair framed her face in a cascade of curls which fell over her shoulders in natural ringlets. Over each ear she had secured a single white rose, small and perfect, which seemed to remain fresh and dew-filled despite the warmth of the evening. Her gown was quite daring and obviously the latest of fashion from Paris. Burr noted it carefully in order to supply Theo with an accurate description when he saw her in a few short weeks. On Theo it would be most beguiling. Taking a long and appreciative look, he had to admit that on Ceil D'Avigne it was also most beguiling. He felt a twinge of regret for her youth and his advanced years. The dress was shorter than that worn by the other women. It was a

"chemise-dress" of white dimity, enhanced with three rows of lace at the bottom and three rows of lace around the very daring neckline. The sleeves were long, very tight, and very sheer. They also were trimmed with three rows of lace at the wrist. In the center of the bust, she had secured another small, perfect white rose, accenting the separation of the bosom. Beneath the dress, there appeared what seemed to be trousers, with straight legs, each one adorned with three rows of white lace. As Senator Butler introduced them, her smile grew radiant and her eyes audaciously returned his admiring gaze. Burr sighed. He knew that waiting for the capture of the alligator would be more enjoyable than he had thought and that he would regret leaving this charming retreat when the time came.

It was with no small amount of reluctance that he did take leave of the island, but if he meant to include a trip to the Floridas, he dare not remain too much longer. It was mid-September and already the hurricane season had begun, making further delay too hazardous to risk. On the fifteenth of September, Aaron Burr and one servant, supplied by Senator Butler, climbed into a canoe and began to paddle down the coastline to Florida. Burr was looking forward to the adventure, but even more to the return, when he would head directly for South Carolina and his beloved daughter, Theodosia.

CHAPTER V

Percy stood looking into her lingerie drawer. She was holding three slips in front of her and debating whether or not to add another to the pile. It probably won't be necessary, she reasoned and closed the drawer with her hip. It was almost ten o'clock and she was beginning to be more than just a bit concerned about Gordon, who had not arrived home. When he called to tell her he would be late, she never imagined it would take this long for him to finish. She was certain that something unexpected must have turned up, but for the life of her, she couldn't think what it could be. They were due to leave day after tomorrow and she knew he was trying to finish a good many odds and ends so he would feel comfortable about being away. The children had been asleep for almost half an hour and she worked as silently as she could laying out enough shirts for Gordon, enough socks and undershorts, making a mental list of the items as she went along. She could think of nothing more dreadful than arriving in Charleston and finding that she had forgotten to pack some essential item. She smiled as she remembered Claire telling her of a trip that she and Sam made to visit Damon Aarons and his wife shortly after they were married. When the Whites arrived at their destination, they discovered to their great consternation that they had everything but clothes. Claire packed the long clothing bags and hung them in the closets with their coats. But the day was warmer than they expected and there was no need for coats after all. Each thought the other had taken the long clothing bags to the car; consequently, neither did, and they were left with only the under clothing and pajamas

which had been packed in the hand suitcase and the clothes they wore. She didn't want to have to live in the same thing for two weeks, and she was certain Gordon wouldn't be happy about that either. She was trying to curb her natural inclination to pack too many rather than too few clothes.

The back door softly closed, barely making enough noise for her to hear. The pale yellow slip she held in her hand slid to the top of the suitcase which lay on the bed. She hurried down the stairs to greet her husband.

"Gee, honey, I was beginning to get worried about you. What happened? Did you have a lot to finish before we go?"

"Uh, yes and no," he fumbled in reply.

"What kind of answer is that?" She laughed. "Are you hungry? I kept some dinner in the warming oven for you."

"No, no. That's all right. Brad and I had to do a lot of extra work, so he ordered sandwiches brought in around seven. I'm really not hungry," he answered. "But I would like a drink." He headed for the family room with Percy trailing behind. "You want one?" he asked her.

"Okay." She nodded. "I'll have some Dubonnet over ice." She sank onto a chair, kicked off her shoes, and tucked her feet under her. "Do you think you're going to get finished in time to leave on schedule, Gordon?" she asked.

Gordon waited until he had finished mixing the drinks. He handed Percy the glass of Dubonnet and sat in a chair facing her. Sipping at his drink, he said, "Percy, I don't know any other way to tell you this but to come right out with it. I'm not going to be able to get away after all—at least not right now."

Percy didn't reply immediately. She was stunned, puzzled, hurt, disappointed. "But why, Gordon, why?" she said when she had regained her thoughts. Gordon had been so certain that this would be a good time for him to be away.

"This afternoon Jim Brewster had a heart attack, and we've got to double up to cover his absence," Gordon explained.

"Is he—is he going to be all right?" she asked.

"They'll know better in the next few days. They think so. He got to the hospital before the worst of it hit him, so the doctor is optimistic, but he warned Helen that Jim wasn't out of danger yet. I'm going to have to take over the meeting Jim was to have with Mr. Randolph. It's his company that's financing this particular project. I can't tell you how sorry I am about this, honey, but there's nothing else to do. Jim and I are the only two men in the company who know enough about the project to meet with Mr. Randolph; otherwise, someone else could take over. Jim had planned to take care of it, but with him in the hospital, Mr. Bradshaw, naturally, asked if I would do it. Even if he hadn't asked, I guess I would have volunteered. Anyhow, that's what kept me at the office so long tonight. We stayed to get the details of everything worked out so we could each take over some part of Jim's work and so I could get the details of the project correlated before sitting down with Mr. Randolph. I couldn't tell you all this over the phone, because I wanted to be with you when I broke the news."

"Well, I knew something had happened, of course, but I couldn't imagine what," Percy told him. "I certainly never expected it to be anything like this. I'll call Helen first thing in the morning and see if there's anything I can do for her. I'm just glad it wasn't you. I'll call Mr. Bryan and tell him that we've had to cancel the trip. We'll go away some other time. I don't mind, really, darling." She smiled at her weary husband.

"I have a better solution. I don't want you to cancel the trip," he said.

"But you can't get away, and I'm not going alone. Don't even suggest it, Gordon. What could be more depressing than being alone in a hotel room? No thank you," she stated firmly.

"I wasn't going to suggest that you go away by yourself. On the way home, I thought it might be a great idea if you and Angie were able to go together. You know what a buff she is about old places, and that's just what Charleston is. She'd love it a lot more than I would, I'm

sure. And it might be a lot of fun for the two of you to get away together," he suggested.

"Oh, darling, she'd never be able to go on such short notice. It's a good idea, but it won't work," Percy protested.

"How do you know till you ask her? I think she'd love to go. Don't you think it's just the kind of trip she'd really get a kick out of?" he asked.

"As far as that goes, of course she would. Old cities are her thing, and I'm sure she'd love to see one that's been preserved as Charleston apparently has. I've even wondered if I had her in mind when I picked it, but it's still ridiculous, Gordon. She has other commitments. Besides, there's David to consider."

"Just answer me this, would you enjoy seeing Charleston with her or wouldn't you?" he asked.

"You know the answer is yes. Next to being with you, I can't think of anyone who would be more fun. She has such a marvelous feeling for historic places. And you're right, it's been a long time since she and I have been able to spend a vacation together."

"Then let's see if she can go in my place," he suggested.

"Oh, I don't know, Gordon. I just think—" Percy hesitated.

"Are you afraid she'll disappear again?" Gordon was quite serious about the question.

"Oh, no. Heavens no. That's not it." Percy couldn't repress a wry smile at the question. "No. I don't think anything like that will ever happen to her again—or to anybody else, for that matter."

"Then I'm going to call and see what she has to say." Gordon stood and took a few steps toward the telephone before Percy stopped him.

"I wish you wouldn't, Gordon. I would feel so guilty about leaving you behind. It was to be our trip together. I'd rather wait until you can get away. It's all right, really it is," she told him.

"That's very sweet but also very foolish, Percy. You know what I'm telling you about Angie makes sense. There's no reason to be gallant. Mrs. Purcell is all ar-

ranged. Linda and Bobby are looking forward to having her stay with them. The tickets, the reservations, everything has been taken care of. You've been looking forward to the trip so much. It would be a shame to cancel the whole thing at this point. And if you remember, the trip was planned, in the first place, for you to have a change and a rest, darling, not for me. I was just going along for the ride."

Percy sat looking at him. He was right. The purpose of the trip had slipped her mind for a moment. It was intended for her to have a change of scene, to get a rest, to take her mind off everything that had so depressed and disturbed her all winter.

"But we've never been apart before, Gordon. I guess I'm afraid to leave you," she explained.

"Oh, honey," he said, crossing the room to her. "Nothing's going to happen to me, and nothing's going to happen to you, either. I won't let it. What would make you say a thing like that?" He put his arms around her and drew her to him. He wished he could make time stand still and the world around them melt away. He wished he could hold her and protect her from anything and everything that might make her unhappy.

"Gordon, I don't want to leave you." She clung to him as to a refuge.

"And I don't want you to. If I could help this, I would, but once you get there, you'll enjoy it. You know you will," he told her soothingly.

"I suppose so," she agreed, attempting a smile, which came out rather weak and anemic. "I suppose I really will." Then she braced herself and added, "You're right. I'm just being silly. The first disappointment, and I begin to sink back into that awful black fear again. First, I was afraid that Damon wouldn't ever be able to return if I didn't do something right away. Now I have a funny feeling that I don't want to be separated from you. I guess I don't have as good control over myself as I thought I did. I always felt so sure of myself, but I don't anymore."

"You can't do anything to help Damon until you have yourself completely in hand, Percy. Being emotionally involved hasn't proved effective at all. You need to get

away from everything and rest. You'll have fun with Angie, probably more than you would dragging me around Charleston. She'll love it, and I would merely appreciate it. I was looking forward to Jamaica, though," he told her.

"So was I," she replied. "All right, I'll phone her."

Resolutely, she picked up the phone and dialed her sister's number. Gordon stood beside her lending moral support, his arm about her shoulders.

David answered the phone. He was somewhat surprised to hear Percy's voice at the other end.

"How are you feeling, Percy?" he asked. "I thought you'd be up to your ears in packing for the vacation."

"Well, I am, David, but something's come up. Is Angie handy?" she asked.

"She's in the work room putting some finishing touches on her latest work. I'll get her."

David opened the door of Angie's work room and said, "You're sister's on the phone, Angie."

"I wonder what she wants at this hour." Angie looked at him inquiringly.

David gave a shrug, indicating that he had no idea, and turned back to the living room and his reading.

Angie wiped her hands on the towel she wore tucked into her belt and picked up the phone. "Hi, there," she greeted her sister.

"Angie, are you sitting down?" Percy began.

"No, do you think I ought to?" Angie inquired, a trifle puzzled by the question.

"I wish you would, because if you fall over in a dead faint and hurt yourself, I wouldn't want to be responsible." Percy tried to keep the conversation light.

"Okay, I'm sitting. Now tell me what this is all about," Angie replied.

Percy explained what had happened at Gordon's office and that he wouldn't be able to make the trip as they planned. "So, we wondered if you'd be able to go in his place," Percy ended.

"Would I ever love that, but it's such a new thought, I don't know," Angie replied. "I have several things that have to be finished . . . and then there's David . . ." At the

mention of his name, David looked up at her. "Give me a minute to think it through," she said. "In fact, let me call you back. I think I'd better talk it over with David before I even think about it."

"Okay, Angie. When you decide, let me know," Percy replied.

Angie hung up the telephone and sat down beside David. She transmitted the message to David as best she could remember, trying to recall all that Percy told her about Jim Brewster's heart attack and the fact that Gordon was not going to be able to go to Charleston. David didn't greet the idea of her leaving with marked enthusiasm, but he did agree that it would probably be good for Percy to have company, and he knew that Charleston would be a wonderful experience for his wife. At length, he agreed that she could go—reluctantly, but he did agree.

"But the second week, honey, you're supposed to go to Des Moines to talk about the painting they want for the new restaurant. Are you going to postpone that meeting? Do you think you can?"

"Oh, darn, for the moment I forgot about that. No, I can't do that. I might lose the assignment if I did. I'll just have to come back at the end of the week, that's all. That painting for the restaurant is just too important. It could mean a series of paintings if they like what I turn out," she replied.

She called and explained the dilemma to Percy, who suggested that the trip seemed to be complicating life for everyone and it might be best if she cancelled after all, but Gordon intervened.

"A week with Angie is better than none," he argued. "My meeting will be over by the end of this week—maybe I can still get the second week off and meet you in Charleston. We can fly on to Jamaica from there. How does that sound?"

"It sounds complicated, that's what. Gordon, I don't mind staying home. I think the trip was just not meant to happen," Percy told him.

"Yes, it was meant to happen. It's just that it was meant to happen in stages," he said. "Now be a good girl

and call Angie back and tell her that one week will be fine. In fact, if she can manage to stay the whole first week in Charleston and come back either Saturday or Sunday, it'll be perfect. I can get there Sunday morning at the latest."

"Are you sure you can get away the second week? What if something comes up?" Percy wondered.

"It's easier to postpone something for one week than two. Don't you worry about that, I'll handle it, honey. You just go ahead and get things ready," he replied.

"Well, what shall I do about your clothes? I have most things packed. Should I take your luggage with me or unpack it again?" she wanted to know.

"Why not just leave it packed, and I'll bring it with me. No sense burdening you with extra luggage. It'll save me having to pack my own things, too," he said.

"I suppose I do have to admit that having you for one week is better than being away two weeks without you. I'm sure you didn't do it deliberately, but I have a suspicion that you're relieved not to have to spend the time in Charleston."

"Now, I never said I wasn't interested in Charleston. In fact, I am, very much so. It's only because I'm more interested in having you back in tip-top form again that I objected to a sightseeing trip. I think what you need is a total rest. But I'm willing to settle for whatever I can get," he remarked.

They left it at that. Percy and Angie would leave on Sunday morning. They would spend the week together in Charleston, and Angie would return on Saturday morning. Gordon was disappointed that his plane wouldn't arrive until nine o'clock Saturday night, and Percy protested to Mr. Bryan, but it was the best arrangement that he could make. Percy would have almost a whole day in Charleston alone. She assured Gordon that she would be familiar enough with the city by that time to be able to amuse herself without getting into any trouble. She meant the remark to sound flippant, but Gordon wasn't much amused by it. There didn't seem to be much of a choice, however, and the matter was settled.

That night as she lay beside Gordon, wakefully tossing

and turning, she was sorry that she had agreed to go away at all. She reached for Damon's watch and felt a strange chill run through her as she touched it. Carefully she replaced the watch on the table and curled into a ball beside her sleeping husband, snuggling down beneath the warm covers. But the chill remained, and through her mind raced an unwanted thought. "I don't want to be alone, darling, I'm afraid . . . afraid."

CHAPTER VI

The trip to Charleston was uneventful and very pleasant. The two sisters spent the time in flight chatting about the things they planned to do and see. They were very careful to avoid any mention of Damon Aarons or of Angie's disappearance in New York the year before. Since Percy avoided the subject of her deep depression during the winter, Angie added that to her forbidden list also.

Percy knew a little about Charleston. After they agreed to spend some time there, she had gone to the library to see what she could find out about the city. The more she read, the more charming she found it. It was exciting to think of a city that was preserved rather than restored, and she was prepared to love it. Still, she wasn't prepared for the thrill she felt as they drove through the streets of that entrancing Southern city for the first time. She felt she had taken a giant step backward in time. Mr. Bryan wanted to find a room for them at the Sword Gate Inn, which was located on Tradd Street. He had spoken so highly of its appeal that Percy was determined to find it on one of their walks through the city. But the Inn was small, it had merely four available rooms, and their inquiry was late. It was not too surprising that it proved impossible on such short notice. Percy was disappointed nonetheless, for the thought of staying in a small inn off the courtyard of one of the eighteenth-century dwellings right in the heart of old Charleston fascinated her. They settled, instead, on the Golden Eagle Motor Inn, which was also in the historic section of old Charleston on Meeting Street. They would still be able to stroll the streets as they wished and peer in through the wrought-iron fences at the old build-

ings and their carefully maintained gardens, of which Charlestonians were justifiably proud. The accommodations proved to be neat, comfortable, and conveniently located.

As they began to settle in their room, Angie sat on the bed and watched Percy unpack her suitcase, placing things neatly in the drawers and on the hangers in the closet.

"You know, Percy, sometimes you amaze me. You really do," she said.

"What have I done now?" Percy found the statement so unusual that she stopped in the middle of unloading her cosmetic case and turned to look at her sister.

"I never in all my life heard you express more than a passing interest in old houses, old cities, old furniture. You've always seemed to fit in with sleek contemporary things—clothes, your house, your life. But here you are burning with excitement over the prospect of seeing this particular historic city. Positively gushing with enthusiasm ever since we hit the city limits. I just don't understand it. History has always been my love, but I think you've just about outdone me. I'm positively dumbfounded. It's fantastic."

"Oh, nonsense, Angie." Percy smiled, brushing off her sister's evaluation. "I'm not a real history buff. I make no claims to that; it's still your title. It's simply that for some reason Charleston excites me . . . no, I think 'excites' may be the wrong word. It fascinates me. But I'm sure it's just a temporary interest, and I can't tell you why it fascinates me. Somehow, when I knew that we would be going on a vacation, I couldn't decide where I'd like to go. I really thought I'd leave it up to Gordon. But when I saw the brochure of Charleston, even before I read it . . . when I saw the name, really . . . it was as though someone turned a light bulb on inside my head . . . as if an arrow was pointed in that direction. I wanted to come here. I had to come . . ." She sat on the arm of a chair and looked out the window at this magnet which had drawn her from nearly halfway across the country. "I believe that if we had planned to go anywhere else in the world and Gordon couldn't make the trip at the last minute—as happened

with this one—I wouldn't have been persuaded to go under any circumstances. I would gladly have cancelled the whole thing. But, you know, Angie"—she faced her sister and looked directly, seriously into her eyes as she continued—"I was relieved that he wanted me to come on. I offered to stay home, of course, and I do feel a little guilty about going off and leaving him, but this was something I had to do. I would have been utterly miserable if I had to cancel this trip. And, the stupid part of it all is that I can't figure out why." She stood and began to finish the task of emptying her cosmetic bag. She avoided her sister's eyes as she added, "Isn't that ridiculous?"

"All I can say to that is, I'm glad even normally sensible, stable, down-to-earth people can have their moments of unreasonable insanity. It makes normally insane creatures like me feel a little better," Angie replied. "Anyhow, you're forgiven. I'm going to enjoy this trip myself. What say we go for a walk?"

The weather for the next few days was beautiful—sunny, warm, breezy, and pleasant. Every time they mentioned the weather, nonetheless, someone was sure to inform them that March could be treacherous and you couldn't depend on whether it would be warm or cold; but there was no evidence of that fact during the week. They were repeatedly told they were too early to see Charleston at its best because the Azalea Festival, which was the highlight of the year, did not take place until April—it was a gala week of festivities which ended with the crowning of the Azalea Queen. Nevertheless, the city was already a fairyland setting of flowering trees and shrubs, and the azalea bushes were bursting with blossoms. They were everywhere and in every possible shading of red, white, coral, pink, orange, and lavender. The air was filled with the pungent, heady perfume of a variety of flowers from the heavy purple blooms of the wisteria to the delicate beauty of the camellias and mountain laurel, accented lavishly by the popular roses. The sisters filled their days with as many tours as they could manage. When they were not taking an authorized tour, they strolled the charming, antiquated streets at random, passing hours walking up one street and down the next. They

attended a play at the Dock Street Theatre one evening. They bought flowers from the vendors on Meeting Street in front of the post office. They spent several hours inspecting the old graves in the Quaker Churchyard, and Angie insisted on seeing the Fraser miniatures as soon as she learned they were in the Gibbes Memorial Art Gallery. They rambled along Rainbow Row with its series of old houses colorfully restored, and looking, indeed, rather like a basket of brightly colored Easter eggs. They were enchanted with the quaint shops along Stoll's Alley. In fact, it seemed to be an endless variety of interesting sights and places for them to inspect from the cobblestone streets to the street that was called "Catfish Row" in *Porgy and Bess*. Percy was indefatigable. Even Angie couldn't keep up with her astounding energy and desire to see and do everything, then to see and do them again.

After three days of concentrating on old Charleston proper, the girls decided it might be fun to rent a car and drive to some of the old plantations and the gardens that were open to the public.

This excursion turned out to be more breathtakingly beautiful than they thought possible. They had seen beautiful flowers in Charleston, but nothing so resplendently lavish as the cultivated gardens which covered acres and acres of land. They took the entire morning to view the Magnolia Gardens and Middleton Place. It was the magnificent and skillfully restored estate which captivated Percy, however. It was called Medway and had been built in 1686, making it older than any building in the state of South Carolina. Percy hated to leave the estate, but Angie insisted that they make an attempt to stick to some kind of a schedule in order to see as much as possible. They had planned to devote the afternoon to viewing the Cypress Gardens, reputed to be the finest and well worth the amount of time. Upon entering the grounds, both girls sensed an almost unreal other-worldly character about the environs. It was not merely the eerie gray-green moss which dropped heavily from the tall straight cypress trees from which the gardens drew its name. By now they had grown accustomed to seeing the moss, which hung everywhere, it seemed. Even the enormous oaks were covered

with their mantle of this featherylike growth. No, it was not only the moss. There was an atmosphere about the place, an atmosphere that would have been difficult to describe, because it was easier to feel than put into words. Percy remembered a piece of music she had always loved but not thought about in years. It was called "Isle of the Dead" and on the cover of the album they had at home was a painting of a boat being propelled through Hades by a boatman with a long pole. The boat was making its way along the pitch-black water through a scene very much like this. She recalled the picture quite vividly and was struck by the similarity between it and the area around her. The water in the Cypress Gardens was also pitch black. The cypress trees rose from it in a stately majesty and in great abundance. There were garden paths, lined with jonquils, iris, and lilies, and the ever-present exquisitely colored azaleas. All were reflected in the inky water pathways like images in a black mirror, causing the scene above and the reflection below to flow and blend into one. The boat which they had hired seemed to be suspended somewhere in midair between the two. The boat guide began to explain about the gardens and how they had come to be.

"You need not be afraid of the water. I have never tipped over a boat yet, but even if I did, you would not drown. Nowhere is the water more than three or three and a half feet deep. This lake was built on what used to be—"

"I know, I know," interrupted Percy. "They used to be rice fields. These are the abandoned rice-field reservoirs." She spoke in a quiet, thoughtful manner, staring into the depths of the inky water.

"Why yes, 'um. That's right. That most certainly is right. This used to be a reservoir for the rice fields that had to be flooded. It's the tannic acid from the trees that makes the water turn so black," the guide explained.

"Oh, Percy, it's marvelous, just unbelievable. I'm so glad we came," enthused Angie. "I've never seen anything to compare with it. It's a fairyland, a dream world. It can't be real." Angie was busy snapping photo after photo of everything about them. "I may give up painting history

and just paint landscapes and garden scenes after this," she trilled.

"Oh, I seriously doubt that . . . But it is compelling, isn't it? I feel so drawn to it," Percy remarked. "Could we stop the boat here and walk along the path for a way, do you suppose?" Percy asked their guide.

"Oh yes, miss. You can walk along and I'll follow you. Just make sure you walk in the direction that the arrows indicate. That way, I can meet you up ahead," he told her.

"That's marvelous, just what I would like. Thank you," she said.

He flashed a smile filled with brilliant white teeth to them. It was such a friendly smile that Percy felt herself instinctively smile in return, as she climbed from the boat. Angie shot one final picture before she slipped the camera strap over her shoulder and followed her sister onto the shore. They walked a few minutes in silence, admiring the scene. Angie stopped to take a shot of Percy standing by the water's edge with the inky-black darkness stretching in the background, dotted with its sentinel-like trees standing at attention. Percy resumed the stroll while Angie lagged behind to take one last shot of the coral azalea bush reflecting in the water. Absentmindedly, Percy stretched out her hand to touch the bushes along the path. She felt a need to make contact with them.

"What are you going to do with all those pictures, Angie?" she inquired as she turned toward her sister.

"I thought if anything came out really well, I'd try painting a scene of it. Who knows, it may be a new facet to my career."

"Yes, it might," Percy agreed vacantly. Her mind was not really on either her question or Angie's answer. Her mind seemed to be floating free somewhere between the depths of the black water and the gray-green moss dripping from the trees. She stood looking into the distance, searching. "You know," she said as though she were talking to the air about her, "I have the feeling that there are answers here if I could only penetrate the darkness . . . If I could just part these waters as Moses did the Red Sea, and step onto the obsolete deserted rice fields beneath,

then I would have the answer. If I could walk out into the fields and feel the mantle of moss about me, I would know, I would feel it, I would have the answer. It's here . . . it's here . . . I feel it about me . . ."

"Percy, what in the world are you talking about? I can't make out your jibberish. What is it that you're feeling about you?" Angie straightened up and turned her camera to the next negative. "I haven't the vaguest notion what you're trying to say. You've got to do better than that."

Percy put her right hand on her sister's arm and slowly turned her to face the same direction she was. With the other hand, she pointed to the water in the distance, reflecting the tall, still trees. All about was quiet; there was no breeze to sway the trailing strands of moss. They hung limp and lifeless; the water was still as glass, smooth, quiet, and ebony dark. Percy looked into the distance, her face was calm, expressionless, her eyes grew glazed with an almost hypnotic quality, and when she spoke, her voice was tinged with a trancelike monotone. "I know it's here—somewhere. Out there in that darkness, there are rice fields of emerald green. The answer to my searching—to my striving is here. I can almost—almost—touch it." She strained to stretch forth her hand to grasp the vacant air just beyond her reach. She would have slipped and fallen into the water if Angie had not grabbed her firmly. As Percy slowly turned to face her sister, she was aware that Angie was staring at her in alarm.

"What's the matter, Angie?" she asked calmly.

"Percy, are you all right?" Angie asked, ignoring the question.

"Why, of course, I am, dear. I'm fine," Percy responded. "Why would you ask that?"

"You . . . you were acting so . . . so weird . . . and you looked so strange. I got the feeling that you saw something I couldn't see . . . It was spooky . . . and I thought you were going to walk into the water . . . What was it, Percy?" Angie wanted to know.

"I didn't see anything . . . only the same things you saw, Angie . . . But I did have the feeling that if I could look deep enough I would find something else—something deep and penetrating and . . . and universal . . .

timeless . . . revealing . . ." Her voice began to trail slowly, as though she were drifting away.

"Percy!" Angie called her sharply in alarm.

Percy looked up at her sister, and seeing the concern, resisted the temptation to look again deep into the murky water. "I'm being silly, Angie. I'm sorry. Let's go back to the boat." They began to walk slowly along the pathway once more. Percy forced herself to smile. "I'm being carried away with the feeling of this magical place. It seems to be so much not of this world. It seems . . . suspended between time and space . . . a place apart from the life that swirls around it."

"Now don't start that again, Percy. You're giving me goose pimples," Angie objected.

"Sorry," Percy apologized.

"When you get started, you have some vivid imagination, sister dear." Angie laughed. They were walking more briskly now and she felt a little foolish at being so alarmed by Percy's behavior. "To think that you're the one who was always telling me to keep my feet on the ground and my head out of the clouds. I've never seen this side of you in action before."

"One of my many fascinating, mysterious qualities," Percy joked.

"Well, I've had enough for one day. I'm exhausted from all this tramping around. Let's go back to the motel, okay?" Angie suggested.

"I suppose we might as well," Percy agreed. Looking at the water, she spied their boatman. "Well, look who's here, just as he promised."

Gratefully, Angie gingerly climbed into the boat with Percy following her. The rest of the excursion was merely a pleasant anticlimax for Percy.

The next day dawned much hotter than had been predicted, much hotter than any of the days before. Over breakfast, the sisters were in the quandary as to how they should spend their time on such a warm day. A walking tour didn't appeal to either of them. They had walked so much and seen so much already. Angie was not very eager to visit another garden after the happenings of the previous day. And it did seem a waste of time to spend

the afternoon in a movie, since they could do that at home. They had exhausted all the possibilities that came to mind readily and finished their breakfast in silence. As the young waitress brought their coffee, Angie made a comment on the unusual weather. The young girl's name was Rose and she had served breakfast to the two sisters every morning of their stay. Each morning they chatted about something with her—what they planned to do that day, what they had done the day before. This morning there seemed to be nothing to say except to comment on the weather. Rose, of course, agreed that it was unusually warm.

"What would you do on such a warm day, Rose, if you didn't have to work?" Percy inquired, sipping at her cup of strong, hot coffee.

"Oh, I wouldn't have any trouble deciding what I would do, I can tell you that for sure," Rose replied with a smile.

"And what would that be?" Angie asked.

"I'd go to the beach," was the prompt reply.

The quickness of the answer made both sisters laugh. "I don't blame you, Rose. That's probably the only sensible thing to do," Percy told her.

"But I guess that's not the kind of answer you were looking for, though," Rose acknowledged. "I suppose you want to fill up your days with sightseeing and all that while you're here. You can always go to the beach at home." She smiled amiably, sorry that she couldn't think of anything better to suggest.

"No, as a matter of fact, we can't. We're from the Midwest, and there really aren't the same kind of beaches that you have here," Angie explained. Then she added with a chuckle, "It's a little far to go swimming in the ocean."

"We have lakes and rivers . . . and pools, of course," added Percy.

"Well, then, why don't you go to the beach? It would be something different for you to do. And it's a great day for the beach. It's hot and sunny but not so hot like it sometimes gets in the middle of summer. I can have the kitchen pack a picnic lunch for you, and I'll tell you how to get to Myrtle Beach. That's the best one around here.

It's real easy. You just drive along the coastal waterway—it's a nice drive, too, and not too far. You can spend the day resting and swimming, and tomorrow you can go off again and catch up on whatever else you want to see. Doesn't that sound like a good idea?" She spoke with such enthusiasm that both women had to admit it did sound inviting.

"Let's do it, Percy. I'd love to see the ocean," Angie urged.

"All right, why not?" Percy agreed. She was rather looking forward to it herself.

"That's just grand. Do you want me to have a picnic lunch fixed up for you?" Rose asked.

"That would be lovely. We'd appreciate it," Percy responded.

"Anything in particular you want to order?"

"Not really. Whatever they fix will be just fine, I'm sure," Percy replied.

"Yes, 'um. When you're ready to leave, you come in and I'll have it here for you." Rose placed the check between them as she did every morning. "I sure hope you have a nice time. You can tell me tomorrow how you liked it." She turned and started to leave the dining room, then she hesitated a moment, made a turn, and came back to them. "I just thought I ought to warn you, the sun can be awful treacherous even at this time of year. You ought to stop and get some sunburn lotion if you don't have any with you."

"I'm glad you told me. I burn like crazy," Angie replied.

"Yes, 'um, I thought you might—with your fair hair and all."

"We'll get some before we go. Thank you, Rose," Percy said.

"Yes, 'um, you're welcome." Rose turned and walked briskly into the kitchen to order their lunch.

Percy picked up the check and started for the cashier to pay for their meal. Angie trailed behind. They had decided it would be easier if they alternated days to pay the check rather than go through the tedious business of try-

ing to figure out who owed how much each time. It was a very compatible system for both of them.

As soon as they were inside their room, Angie slapped one hand to her head. "Oh!" she exclaimed, stamping her foot against the carpet. "I forgot. I can't go to the beach. I didn't bring a bathing suit. I didn't think I'd need one."

"Oh, don't worry. I brought two. You can borrow one of mine. We may not have the same shape, but in the overall average, I think it'll probably work out all right," Percy said. She was a couple of inches taller than her younger sister and considerably straighter. Angie's figure was not really plump, but it was much rounder than Percy's. Percy selected a two-piece suit of a peach-and-yellow geometric print and threw it to Angie. Angie stood up and went to the mirror, holding the suit close to her face. The colors were most becoming with her fair hair and pale complexion. It showed her large, soft brown eyes to perfection.

"Okay, I'll take it," she agreed.

Slipping into the suit, she found the effect more than satisfactory. Over it she pulled a loose, full dress of yellow Indian gauze and tied her hair with a scarf of the same material. Percy had pulled on her own suit, a pale-buff color with a large stripe of burnt orange which crossed diagonally from top to bottom. With it she wore a striped cotton shift of the same colors and a scarf to match.

"I really think I'm going to enjoy this," Percy said, smiling at her sister's reflection in the mirror.

"I know I am," Angie returned. "I've never been to the ocean. Do you realize that? I've never seen the ocean!"

"Well," replied Percy with a toss of her head, "neither have I, and I'm a few years older than you, my dear." Picking up her bag from the dresser, she added, "Let's not waste any more time. Let's go out and find us an ocean."

They stopped by the little coffee shop to pick up the picnic lunch that had been packed for them. They also made it a point to stop for the sunburn lotion that Rose cautioned them to get. Then, following Rose's careful directions, Angie drove across the very long and im-

pressive John P. Grace Memorial Bridge, which spanned the Cooper River and joined Charleston with the mainland on the other side. Traveling along the Ocean Highway, they headed in the direction of Myrtle Beach. They drove in silence for awhile, enjoying the pleasant view and feeling of well-being which the weather had brought on, both of them feeling just a bit lazy and carefree with the prospect of doing nothing for the rest of the day. Percy sat watching the scenery and the sun dancing on the waves that rose and fell on their journey to the shore to stroke the beach before departing once more. She watched in fascination at the sameness of the movement of the ocean. When they had driven about ten miles or so, she was struck by the fact that most of the land she was watching pass on the right was a series of islands.

"Angie, do you realize that's a whole bunch of little islands out there? I had no idea there were so many islands clustered so close off the shore," she said.

"Neither did I," Angie admitted. "I always thought it would be just land and then ocean." Then she added as an afterthought, "I must confess, I haven't really given it a whole lot of thought, though."

"Now isn't that fascinating. I wonder who lives out there." It was more than an idle curiosity; she was genuinely interested.

"Rich people, I guess," Angie laughed.

"You're probably right about that." Percy joined her amused laughter. "With the breeze from the ocean, I should think it would be a lovely place to spend the summer—much better than in the city. There—there's the island that I would go to," she said, pointing to one they were just passing.

"Why that one, Percy? They all look alike to me," Angie replied, stealing a look before her eyes turned again to the highway.

"I—I don't know. I just like that one best," Percy answered thoughtfully.

They rode on in silence, each comfortable in the company of the other, feeling no need for words. Percy found it strange that she should be drawn to one particular island more than the rest. Angie mentally noted that Percy

seemed to be over her mysterious reaction to the gardens they visited the previous day. It was somewhat disconcerting, and she didn't want Percy to slip into a depression like those she had undergone during the winter. Whatever the significance of the episode of yesterday afternoon, Percy didn't display any effects of it, and Angie felt certain that a day on the beach would offer no opportunity for a repeat performance.

A sudden movement on the part of Percy caused Angie to wonder if she might be wrong. Percy abruptly sat erect, leaning forward, her eyes intent on a sign they were approaching. "LOOK! Angie, look! It's Brookgreen Gardens. There it is," she said pointing to the sign. "Let's stop and see it, shall we?" There was an exhilaration in her voice which alarmed Angie.

"Not on your life!" she answered. "We're spending the day relaxing at the beach, remember? We did all the garden viewing that I care to do for awhile." Angie shook her head firmly, her face a mask of unshakable determination.

"But this is different, Angie. It's special," Percy insisted.

"They are all special in their own way, and we're still going to the beach," Angie replied adamantly. She didn't even turn her head to look at the sign as they passed. After a minute, she inquired, "What do you think is so special about this one?"

Percy shrugged and settled back into her seat. "I don't know. It's just special, that's all. I just feel I ought to see it."

The day was glorious and restful. The sun was warm and relaxing. The two young women soon caught the hang of riding the waves, jumping into them, and allowing themselves to be carried in toward the shore. They were pleasantly surprised at the buoyancy they felt in the salt water. It was exhilarating. After lunch, they walked along the beach for several yards looking for interesting rocks and shells. And in the late afternoon they spent a long time watching the waves in their endless pitching and rolling as they deposited new layers of sand and shells only to wash them back out again on the return trip to the deep water.

"Just think, Percy, this goes on all the time. The waves never stop. Even while we sleep, they're still going back and forth, in and out. Isn't that unbelievable? On and on since the beginning of time—until the end of time." Angie was caught in the wonder of the ocean that all humans feel on first encounter.

"Yes, the ocean is a marvel—but it's also fickle and treacherous," Percy replied, staring at the horizon.

"What?" Angie turned to her sister. "What made you say that?"

"It is, you know. It's peaceful and serene now. It's beautiful. But in a storm it can be frightening, treacherous. I would never want to be out in the ocean during a storm. It must be a terrible thing to drown," Percy remarked anxiously.

Angie didn't know what to say. The sight of Percy staring into the distance disturbed her, but she thought it best not to pursue the subject any further. She rolled onto her stomach and burrowed her head into her folded arms, relishing the warm sun on her back. Percy sat for a long while staring at the horizon where the sky and water met.

The day passed all too quickly. It was over before the two sisters had tired of watching the restless movement of the ocean and soaking up the warming rays of the sun. As they headed back to Charleston, it was agreed that they must return before the end of their vacation together. But that was the end of the overly warm weather. During the night there was rain, and the next day the weather was again pleasant but considerably cooler. Again they had difficulty deciding how to spend their day. It was too cold for the beach, and Angie resolutely vetoed Percy's suggestion to visit Brookgreen Gardens. So when Rose suggested they make a visit to Fort Sumter, both women readily agreed. It would be a different kind of excursion from any they had taken so far. They had to take a boat to Fort Sumter, an island not far from the tip of Charleston, where the first shot of the Civil War had been fired. Standing on the little island, looking across the water toward the beautiful city of Charleston, the two women tried to imagine how the Union soldiers felt as they watched the Southern troops on shore fire at them. But

the day was pleasant, with a breeze so gentle, that time and events so far removed in history seemed too remote to be important. Percy's feeling about the fort was that of a detached but interested spectator. Angie was glad she displayed none of the morbid attraction to the place that she had displayed for the gardens. In fact, Angie noted with pleasure that Percy seemed to enjoy the day tremendously and was regaining her sense of humor. She was very gay. The gaiety remained with her throughout the day and evening, making Angie's task of preparing to return home a good deal easier. She would have been reluctant to leave Percy alone had she been disturbed or distracted. Angie could see no cause for concern in Percy's light-hearted demeanor.

"What are you going to do with yourself today, Percy?" Angie asked, partly to make conversation and partly in genuine interest. The time between arrival at the airport and actual departure from the ground seemed interminable. Everything had been said that was to be said. It was only the desire to be together until the last minute that spurred the need to talk.

"I thought I might go back to the beach again. We never did find the time for that, remember?" Percy responded. "And the day promises to be a very warm one again."

"Sounds terrific. Wish I could go along."

"I'll probably pick up a book to read. And I thought about stopping to see that garden I wanted to see—Brookgreen, I think it was called," Percy added.

"I wish you wouldn't. I mean, why waste the time on another garden? You've seen enough," Angie replied.

"Well, maybe you're right. I might not go after all," Percy agreed.

"And don't forget that you still have to pack," Angie said.

"I remember, never fear."

"What time does your plane leave?" Angie asked.

"At 7:05 in the morning. And Gordon arrives tonight a little after nine. I'll be very happy to see him, too . . . I've missed him this week."

"Yes, I know. I've missed David . . . Well, have fun to-

day," Angie said as she kissed her sister's cheek and headed for the plane. At the top of the stairs, just before disappearing through the open door, she turned to wave farewell to Percy. Percy waited until she was inside the great white plane, then she turned and walked slowly through the terminal and back to the rented car in the parking lot. Leisurely, she drove back to the motel and went straight to her room. The quiet of the room was surprisingly unsettling. While Angie was with her, the room seemed to assume some of Angie's animation, but now that she was gone, it was merely a pleasant room with no real life of its own. She was anxious to be away from it. "I'll pack when I get back from the beach," she told herself and went about the task of changing into a swim suit with no delay. She drew on a shift over her suit and inspected herself in the mirror. Frowning slightly at the image, she wondered if she ought to change into something more suitable just in case she decided to tour the gardens on the way. "Oh, maybe I won't after all," she told herself and stared at her reflection for another few seconds. Making a quick decision, she slipped out of the shift and reached for a skirt and blouse. "Yes, that's better," she told her reflection. On her way to the car, she stopped at the coffee shop for a sandwich and some fruit to take along. Rose was nowhere to be seen, so Percy left without taking the time for a cup of coffee.

The highway was still familiar from the trip a few days earlier and Percy found the drive refreshing. It was a lazy, sunny midmorning without too much traffic on the road. She was in no hurry to be anywhere, and she enjoyed the view as she drove. As she approached the sign for Brookgreen Gardens, again she felt the urge to see it and for a split-second was torn with indecision, but there was no denying that she truly did want to see it. As she drove toward it, she wondered why. It turned out to be a restored old estate. It had once belonged to a family named Alston, an interesting, perhaps, but certainly inconsequential fact, she thought. She was perplexed by her desire to see this particular estate. It seemed in no way outstanding . . .

As she roamed aimlessly about the grounds, she found

that she was standing beside a small cemetery. Inspecting one of the stones, she discovered that it was obviously a cemetery for the Alston family. She stopped at one grave and, noting the small size, realized that it must be a child's. How sad for the mother, she thought. Her mind flashed to her own Linda and Bobby. She felt a sudden longing for them and wished they were with her. Peering at the name on the gravestone, she read: "Aaron Burr Alston." How odd, she thought. I wonder if that could be a relative of the real Aaron Burr or merely a child named for him. She vaguely remembered that Burr had done something dreadful, but she couldn't recall what. It seemed very strange that anyone would name a child after him. But maybe she was wrong. She didn't remember much about him and wished she had shown more interest in history when she was required to study it in high school. She glanced at the next stone, which read: "Joseph Alston." Probably the boy's father. She recalled going through a house in Charleston which was called the "Alston House" and wondered if it might have been theirs—surely it must be someone from the family. She stood contemplating the small patches of earth which marked the resting places of these two people who possibly in former days had been familiar with this plantation. If they were father and son, where would the mother be? Though she searched all the nearby headstones, not one of them seemed to mark the grave of the boy's mother. How very odd, she noted. How very odd. I wonder what happened to her, she thought, how she became separated from the rest of her family. Then Percy wondered why it should matter to her. These people had died well over a hundred years before. Why should they interest her? "It doesn't, it doesn't matter to me at all," she said aloud.

The sound of her own voice surprised her and she looked around to see if anyone else might be close enough to overhear her. She saw no one. She was quite alone. Well, that's a relief she thought and smiled at her own embarrassment. She looked again at the two headstones and found that it did matter to her. For some reason, in spite of her protest, it did matter. I wonder why, she

thought. Could they have been ancestors? Was it possible? She very much doubted that was the case but found her curiosity overwhelming. Suddenly, the beach had lost its appeal. She decided that she would prefer to spend her afternoon in the Charleston Library to see what she could find out about the Alstons and why they should interest her so.

As she continued to look at the two graves in front of her, she was consumed with sadness, a feeling of melancholy loneliness that caused a shiver to run through her body. As tears welled in her eyes, she was overcome by a sensation of total despair. Her body began to tremble and sobs sprang from her throat. With tears blurring her vision and streaming down her face, she turned and stumbled toward the safety of the car. It was several minutes before she was able to gain control of herself enough to start the car and head back toward the road which led to the highway. She fought to resist the temptation to look back and stubbornly refused to allow her eyes to leave the road ahead of her. It was sentimental foolishness and she would not again succumb to such nonsense. How she longed for the evening and the arrival of Gordon.

She drove carefully along the road, enjoying the wind on her face through the open window. There was peace and solace in driving through the lovely countryside and she decided to take advantage of it for just a few more miles before returning to the highway and the library at Charleston. Besides, she had never seen the kind of life and dwellings that might be further inland. Driving along a country road might be diverting, the change of pace she craved at the moment to restore her to some kind of level-headed thinking. The road became very narrow, only two lanes. It didn't seem to hold much promise ahead, but she determined to give it a try for another few miles before turning back to the highway. Just ahead there was a curve in the road and beyond that a bridge which spanned a river of about a hundred feet across. The river ran, perhaps, forty or fifty feet below the bridge. Percy found it a very picturesque, rural sight and eased her foot from the accelerator as she made the easy

curve and approached the bridge. She wondered if there might be a hidden manor house somewhere hidden among the trees on the other side.

From out of nowhere, it seemed, around a curve in the road on the other side of the bridge, a small boy appeared riding a bicycle. Absently, she wondered what he might be doing on this country road, where he had come from. She supposed he lived in a house somewhere down the road, and she wondered what it might be like. She watched closely as he continued to pedal toward her. She would judge him to be about twelve or thirteen, about the age of her own Bobby. He was dressed in jeans and a tee-shirt and wore sneakers but no socks. In his hand he carried something, was it a fishing pole? She thought so. As she started across the bridge, she hoped he would stop on the opposite side and settle down to fish there.

The bridge was so narrow that the thought of driving across it while he approached made her nervous. But he did not stop. He continued on as though he were unaware of her existence, lost in his own thoughts. She continued, as slowly as she dared, across the bridge. She told herself not to be foolish. It was obvious that there was enough room on the bridge for both of them, and it was equally obvious that the boy, at least, was accustomed to crossing while cars were on the bridge; but she was still uncomfortable. She looked at the speedometer. It was now just twenty miles an hour, a reasonable and safe speed. When she raised her eyes again to look at the road in front of her, it was just in time to see the boy's bicycle hit something in the road. The bicycle swerved, tilted, and fell on its side, throwing the boy into the road directly in the path of Percy's car and only a few feet ahead of it.

Horried, Percy jammed her foot on the brake pedal. In an instinctive reaction, without considering the consequences, she pulled the wheel to the right and pushed with all her strength against the brake. Her only thought was not to hit the boy. The car moved to the right, struck the guard railing of the bridge and, crashing through it, dived front end first into the river below. It settled into the river at the water's edge and began to sink slowly into the muddy bottom. The water rose and lapped against the

side of the car until it reached somewhere just below the door handle.

As the car made its leap into the river, Percy's head had jerked forward and crashed against the front windshield with a resounding blow. The force and sound of her head striking the window seemed to Percy as though an incredible explosion had taken place inside her head. She clung desperately to the thin shred of consciousness which remained hers. Over and over she told herself, "I must hang on. I must hang on. I can't let go. I don't dare let go." She knew there was water about her feet and reasoned that she had fallen into the river, but just how deep it was she had no way of knowing. She knew that she must get out of the car or she might drown. "I don't want to drown. I don't want to drown. I don't want to drown," she kept repeating. She made an effort to lift her hand to the door but found she was unable to move it; the exertion was beyond her strength. Again and again through her mind raced the thought, I must hang on. I don't dare pass out. I can't lose consciousness. I can't. If I let go, I may not come back. I may die. I may die, and I don't dare die. The children are so young—too young. They need me. I've got to fight. I've got to hang on. I must.

She was aware of a pain so intense that it seemed to fill the very fiber of her being, so intense that it submerged every other thought, every other sensation, and she was caught up in one gigantic, all-consuming, swirling, pulsating, blinding pain. Around and around she seemed to swirl inside a fantastic blood-red wheel of pain. She struggled to summon all her strength and made a supreme effort to open her eyes, but all she could see was a red blur. She wasn't able to bring anything into focus and wondered if she might be blind. Again she was caught up in the ever-faster spinning vacuum of grotesque agony. She no longer controlled her thoughts, which spun on a circle of pain like a record playing a broken groove over and over, repeating the same idea endlessly: "I can't give in to the pain. I must hold on. If I give in, I may die. I've got to hang on. Oh, God, help me to hang on. Help me hang on."

She was oblivious of the water which surrounded her, hiding her legs and covering her lap. She opened her

mouth to scream in protest against the pain, against her helplessness. She wanted to cry for help but only a soft plea came out. "Help me, please, help me. Somebody, help me," she murmured. The strain of holding her head erect became too great and slowly she allowed it to drop until it rested against the steering wheel. She fought to lift it again, but no amount of exertion could raise it. In spite of herself, she could not keep her mind from retreating into a baffled state of semidarkness enclosed in a brilliant red circle hanging suspended, writhing, twisting, aware only of pain and a desperate need to cling to life.

At last, a mantle of dark red clouds rose billowing and swirling about her, gently separating, dividing her from the piercing pain and carrying her afloat on waves of oblivion, deeper and deeper into a mercifully vacant sphere where she was no longer aware of the world about her and the pain grew ever more remote and more bearable. The mind, through some mysterious compassionate process, ceased its willful struggle and surrendered to the shelter of a warm and comforting state of unconsciousness as Percy lapsed into a coma. The water which covered her lap began to turn a muddy red as the blood flowed from her head and trickled in a steady stream down her face and into the river.

Roger Kempley picked himself up from the road. Tears were stinging his eyes and mingled with the dust from the road made muddy blotches on his cheeks. The tears were not for his torn trousers, not even for his cut knee and scraped ankle. Roger Kempley was crying because he was frightened. He had almost been struck by a car, and he saw the car crash through the rail of the bridge and fall into the water below. In all his twelve years he'd never seen anyone die, and he'd never even been close to an accident before. That much would be enough to frighten any kid his age, but worst of all, he was afraid that the crash had killed whoever was in the car or else he'd be drowned for sure. He rushed to the twisted railing and looked down at the car resting in the water. At least it had hit the edge, so it didn't sink to the bottom. That was

good. He could probably make it down the sloping bank to where the car was, but he figured it wasn't very likely he'd be able to get anybody out of the car in the water where it sat—that is, if anybody in there was still alive.

Panic began to replace fear as thoughts tumbled over themselves in Roger's mind. Should he go down and see if the driver was still alive? If he was alive, then what should he do? If he wasn't hurt too bad, maybe together they could get him free of the wreck and out of the car. Roger thought that might be a good idea, but still he hesitated. On the other hand, if he was really hurt, Roger was too small to be able to handle a grownup by himself . . . And if he was dead—beads of sweat stood out like drops of fresh rain on Roger's forehead—if he was dead . . . that'd mean Roger was responsible and might have to go to jail.

Staring intently at the car, Roger tried to sort out his thoughts and decide whether he should simply walk away from the accident and try to forget about it. No one had seen it happen but him. No one knew he had been there. Suppose he didn't tell, not anyone, just wait until someone else came along and found the car in the water. That way they'd never be able to accuse him of killing whoever the driver was. He wasn't really positive that he could be arrested for something like this, but the idea seemed very possible and very frightening to the twelve-year-old boy.

Slowly he turned his back to the scene below and was aware of an ominous quiet. There was not a sound, not a moan, not a cry from the water below him. "I didn't mean it to happen, I really didn't," he said to no one in particular, speaking barely louder than a whisper. He bent down to pick up his bicycle and inspected it carefully. It didn't show any sign of damage, but he didn't feel like climbing on it again just yet; so he wheeled it, instead, back across the bridge heading for home. As he reached the road on the other side, his steps grew slower and slower until, finally, he stood still in the middle of a country road thinking, wondering, frightened and uncertain. Was he a coward, a traitor, a down-right no-account "yellow chicken" to walk away and leave somebody down in the river hurt or dying, or maybe already dead? Then

something new occurred to Roger. If the driver died and he never even tried to help, maybe the ghost of that poor person would come back to haunt him for the rest of his natural life. He'd never seen one, but he'd heard a lot of talk about ghosts, so he figured there must be such a thing. He didn't have to see one to be afraid of them, and he'd just as soon *never* have to see one, thank you—especially not the ghost of someone he just walked away from and left there to die.

His tears had stopped but his nose was running. He wiped at it with the sleeve of his shirt and brushed his cheeks with the palm of one dirty hand. He carefully propped his bike against a massive oak tree beside the road and turned to survey the wreck once more. No matter what happened to him—even if he had to spend his whole life in jail for causing the accident, he couldn't just walk away and leave somebody down there. He had to go down and find out how bad the person in the car was hurt. He carefully picked his way down the sloping bank of the river. Further downstream, the land next to the river stretched out and became more level, but he didn't want to waste the time it would take to use that approach. He wanted to take the fastest way down, now that he had made up his mind.

As he came closer to the car, he could make out that there was only one person in the front seat of the car. He waded into the water until he stood beside the car with his hand on the open window frame. He stood in the muddy river, staring at the still figure slumped over the steering wheel. It was a woman and she was motionless, frighteningly so. He listened for the sound of breathing but heard none. He raised one hand to touch the woman's back to see if he could feel her breathe, but the sight of the red-stained water inside the car sickened him. He swallowed hard and mustered his determination, telling himself, "You've just got to find out if she's still alive, Roger Kempley, 'cause there's no one else to do it. Besides, Roger Kempley, you're not gonna be no coward." He swallowed again and reached through the window to touch the woman. Since there was no response, Roger shook the shoulder gently. Though she was lost

somewhere in the twilight zone of deep shock, Percy was aware that someone was trying to rouse her. She strained to respond but managed only a weak moan before sinking again into the unknowing sleep that comes when the body can no longer tolerate excessive pain. Roger's eyes widened in surprise. She was alive. There was a chance to help her. But he would have to get someone here in a hurry. There wasn't anything that he could do by himself. He'd have to go for help—his mom and dad, they'd know what to do.

"Don't you worry none, I'll get help for ya," he said to the inert figure. He didn't know if the woman could hear him or understood what he was saying, but he figured it wouldn't hurt to tell her just in case. "We'll be right back, just as fast as we can. Just don't you worry," he said.

Roger pedaled his bike faster than he could ever remember pedaling before. He thought the most sensible thing to do was to head for home. It wasn't too far from the river and his folks would be quick to help anyone who was hurt. They always pitched in to help anybody who needed it. There wasn't any hospital in Plantersville, where he lived, but there was an awful good doctor, Doc Chester, who took care of everybody around. Maybe he'd be able to take care of this woman, too. By the time he burst into his kitchen, he'd forgotten his injured knee and scraped ankle. Sarah Kempley looked up from her ironing as Roger rushed toward her.

"Land sakes, Roger, where you been? What happened to you?" she asked, staring at his torn jeans and his stained face.

It took several precious minutes before he was able to explain to her how the accident had come about and that the car was now resting in the river just at the edge of the bank.

"We gotta get Doc Chester back there right away, mom. She's hurt bad. That ol' river water's just as bloody as all git out," he exclaimed. "She may even be dead by the time we git back to her," he added, on the verge of tears.

Sarah quickly made the necessary calls to her husband and to Doc Chester. The doctor agreed to pick up Fred

Kempley from his shop and hurry over to the Kempley house so Roger could direct them to the accident.

While they were waiting for the two men, Roger hesitantly asked his mother the question which had been plaguing him since the accident. "If she dies, mom, will I be sent to prison?"

His face was so miserable that Sarah reached out her arms to her growing boy and gathered him to her. "No, Roger, no. You didn't do anything deliberately. It was an accident, and accidents happen, that's all. You won't be punished," she told him soothingly.

Roger was grateful for his mother's calm, capable nature, and he was glad he decided not to run away from the accident. "I hope she doesn't die," he said, looking into his mother's face. "I hope she lives."

"I do, too," answered his mother, holding him close for one second longer. When she released him, she began to gather up spare blankets from the linen closet. She handed them to Roger and said, "Put these in the back of the station wagon. We'll need to keep her warm no matter what kind of injury she's got."

Roger did as he was told, happy to be useful in some concrete way. Roger and his mother led the way to the accident in the Kempley's station wagon. Dr. Chester and Roger's father followed closely behind in the doctor's sedan. Dr. Chester lost no time as soon as they reached the bridge. He was the first one down the river bank to the half-submerged car. Leaning through the open window, he made a cursory examination of the unconscious woman. Noting the amount of blood that had stained the water inside the car, he thought it best not to move her head until it was absolutely necessary. He felt for a pulse and had some difficulty in locating one. He nodded his head as he finally detected the faint, slow but steady rhythmic beat. He called to Roger's mother to get out the blankets that were piled in the station wagon. Together she and Roger carried them to a spot about halfway down the bank where there was enough level ground to place them. Roger's father was now beside the doctor in the water.

"Right there's fine, Sarah," called Dr. Chester. "Just

spread 'em out as best you can do." Turning to Fred he asked, "You got any rope in your car, Fred?"

"Maybe, Doc, but I don't recollect that we do," Fred replied.

"Sarah, take a look in the trunk of my car. I think there may be a piece of rope there. Put it with the blankets," he instructed. "Oh, just use the key that's in the ignition. That works the trunk, too," he added.

Again Sarah and Roger rushed back to the waiting cars. She found the key in the ignition and opened the trunk of the car. They both began to rummage around for the rope. Sure enough, there it was behind the spare tire. It didn't seem too big, maybe about twice the size of the jump ropes used by the kids at school. But it was all they found. She handed the rope to Roger with directions to hurry back to his father and Doc Chester. He was younger and faster than she was. As Roger scurried away, she closed the trunk and replaced the key in the ignition before she ran to catch up with Roger.

"Just lay the rope right down there, son," his father called to Roger as he made his way down the bank of the river. "Stay close to your mother, Roger," he called as Sarah returned. Then he turned his attention again to Dr. Chester. "What do you think, Doc? She looks hurt pretty bad to me."

"She is, Fred. She has a bad head wound. I hate to examine it here in the river. If the bleeding has started to slow down at all, I'd hate to start it up again. She could bleed to death before we ever got her to a hospital."

"What do you think we ought to do?" Fred asked. "Suppose we ought to try pulling her through the window?"

"No, no! We don't dare do that, Fred. I know about the head wound because I can see she's bleeding from the head, but there may be other injuries, too," the doctor explained. "You can't tell what broken bones she may have or what other damage may be done inside—internal injuries. We're going to have to go about moving her as slow and gentle-like as possible just so we don't make anything worse than it is already. We've got to get the door open and then just kind of ease her out into the

water as carefully as we can. What we want to do is just sort of lay her down on top of the water, let it help support her body. Then we can get her to shore all right. I just wish we could talk to her, that's all, get her to tell us where she's hurt. I only hope she didn't damage anything in her spine, 'cause that could be real big trouble. A broken arm or a broken leg would be bad enough, but they can be fixed without too much trouble. But I tell you, Fred, if she's got a broken spine, we could just snap her whole spinal column in two and paralyze her for life if we tried to drag her through that window."

"I never thought about something like that, Doc," Fred said, apologetic.

"I know. We'll just have to take it one step at a time, that's all, Fred. First thing we've got to do is get this door open," he said, tugging at it.

Fred squirmed his feet into the soft, spongy river bottom, working to find as firm a hold as he could manage. "Okay, Doc. I'm ready whenever you say."

"You take hold of the door by the window there, and I'll get the handle. When I count to three, pull as hard as you can and keep on pulling. If we get it open and you let up, the river water could force it shut again right away. Okay . . . one . . . two . . . three . . . HEAVE!" he shouted, pulling with all his might. Fred pulled, too, as hard as he could, but their combined strength only succeeded in rocking the car, and they felt it slip a little in the slimy silt below the wheels.

When it had settled, Dr. Chester said, "Okay, Fred, let's try again. When I count three, pull." Again he began to count, but the door refused to budge.

"You sure the door's not locked, Doc?" Fred wondered.

"No, I made sure of that before we started. It's just wedged," Dr. Chester replied.

On the bank of the river, Roger and his mother waited, both of them tense, concentrating all their energies on the efforts of the two men below, as though the very tenseness of their bodies could assist in the struggle to free the prisoner from the vehicle. Suddenly, Roger was distracted by a splash of sunlight on the water somewhere upstream.

He was aware of it out of the corner of his vision. He turned to search the water and noticed that the sun was reflecting on a strange series of large ripples maybe a hundred yards or slightly more upstream. The ripples looked to be large enough that they could have been caused by a large rock falling into the river; but he reasoned it would have to be larger than the stones he and his friends liked to skip over on the water. He searched the bank as far as he could, trying to find someone who might have thrown the rock, but there was no one on either side of the bank that he could make out. He turned his attention back to the river and found that the flash of sunlight was gone. In its place, almost in the middle of the river now, was a large, dark, greenish black log. At least, it appeared to be a log or a piece of floating debris. Anyone not schooled from childhood to be wary of the dangers in this region of the country would have thought nothing more about it, but Roger recognized it immediately. It didn't take him long to detect the side-to-side rhythmic movement in the water by which the alligator was moving himself slowly but steadily downstream in the direction of the rescue scene.

"Mom, look. There's an alligator," he shouted, pointing in the direction of the animal.

She stared in horror at the ugly beast. "Fred, there's an alligator coming this way. Hurry," she shouted to her husband.

There was no question that the alligator was soon going to be aware of them, if it wasn't already.

"Oh, damn!" Doc uttered in anger and frustration.

"What do you think we ought to do, Doc?" Fred asked. He was not anxious to tangle with an alligator under the best of circumstances.

"Just what we are doing. We've got to get this stubborn door open and get this woman out of here as quick as we can. That alligator don't mean we have a right to quit, Fred. It just means we gotta get her out faster, that's all that means." The anger in his voice was caused by the situation, not by his partner's fear. He was afraid himself, but he couldn't leave the injured woman behind.

"Roger," Fred shouted to his son, "when that 'gator

gets within reach, you start pelting it with rocks or big sticks or anything you can get your hands on. Try to hit his head—aim for his nose or his eyes. Don't waste no time hitting it on the back, boy, 'cause you know he won't even feel it." He turned to the doctor and explained. "I don't expect him to be able to stop it, Doc, but maybe we can buy us a few minutes extra time." Dr. Chester nodded, and again the two men began to tug at the jammed front door of the car.

On the bank, both Roger and his mother hurried upstream toward the alligator, picking up what large rocks they could manage on the way. They thought it best to pursue the animal rather than wait for it to pursue the two men. It wasn't likely that they could get close enough to do any real harm to the thing because it was keeping to the middle of the river. They only hoped to distract it for awhile or turn it back upstream. When she thought they were close enough, Roger's mother threw a large rock with all the force she could manage. It fell a good twelve inches short of the alligator's right side. It took no notice of it. Roger threw the next rock, which bounced off the creature's back without even being felt. Then, in unison, they began to throw whatever they could get in their hands quickly, aiming as carefully as possible for the eyes of the alligator. Nothing seemed to be able to reach the target, and the alligator, undisturbed, continued its progress downstream, inching closer and closer to the trapped automobile.

Through the windows of the car, the two men could now see the creature. It was about fifty yards away.

"Sure wish I had me my gun, Doc," said Fred, pausing for a moment.

"Don't worry about it now, Fred. Wishing ain't gonna do us no good. We gotta get this woman out of here and fast. PULL, damn it. PULL," Doc Chester ordered.

The ripples of water caused by the slow, steady movement of the alligator now mingled with the more violent ones caused by the frantic movement of the men. The sun danced merrily from one to the other of them, making no distinction between the two. The alligator turned slightly and began to glide closer to the bank. It was perhaps a

hundred feet from the car. Suddenly the head was thrust out of the water, only slightly raised but enough for Roger to take quick aim and throw a rock the size of a baseball with remarkable accuracy and equal luck. The missile struck the alligator in the eye. It twisted its head in pain and snapped its jaws. The water rose and fell about it as it splashed its tail viciously from side to side. For the moment its forward progress was halted, but how long before it recovered and headed in angry pursuit of its attacker, there was no way to tell. The animal was not badly hurt, but it was certainly aroused, and its wrath could mean trouble for whatever happened to be in its path. Fred and Dr. Chester were having enough trouble without adding an angry alligator to it. The thrashing of its body caused waves now, instead of ripples on the water, and the men could feel the added movement of the water against their bodies. Doc prayed that it did not combine with their own pulling on the car to cause it to slip further into the water.

"Don't pay it any mind, Fred—just pull," coaxed Dr. Chester as together the two men heaved with that extra measure of strength that so often springs from desperation. This time the door moved, separated from the car a few inches.

"Hey, Doc, we did it!" shouted Fred in jubilation.

"Slowly, now, just keep it opening steady," encouraged Dr. Chester. "That's it. Easy does it."

"I couldn't go any faster anyhow, Doc. The water keeps pushing against it," Fred reported.

"Yes, I know. Okay, now, that's far enough. I'll hold it and you get around and put your weight against it and keep it open. I'll take a hold of her and see if I can ease her back into the water and out of the car. I've got it now, you go around," he told Fred, bracing himself to stand the full weight of the open door. Sure is a lucky thing that alligator stopped when it did, he thought to himself. But as he looked over the hood of the car, he could see he was wrong. The animal had nearly finished its writhing and raised its ugly head to open its mouth. The sight of the many sharp, pointed teeth set in the wide jaws was enough to frighten any man. Doc had seen the

damage those teeth could do to a man, and it wasn't a memory he cherished. As soon as Fred was braced against the door, Dr. Chester began to ease himself around and into the car. He didn't intend to waste precious time or needless motion in the rescue, not only for the sake of the unconscious victim, but also for his own sake and Fred's. Alligators were able to travel with surprising speed through the water once they were aroused.

Roger and his mother, on the bank, were following the alligator's progress toward the car. Sarah cupped her hands around her mouth and called, "Doc! Fred! He looks awful mean now. Shall we start to throw rocks again? I don't want him to get too close to you."

"Tell her no, Fred," Doc ordered without lifting his head from his task.

"No, Sarah," Fred shouted, "just keep your eyes on him. Let us know what he's up to. Let Roger get a pile of rocks handy, though. But don't provoke him anymore. Don't want him goin' after you two."

"We got a lot of them ready," Sarah answered.

Fred stole a look at the creature in the water and felt a prickling in his spine as he watched the beast lower its head into the water and begin to move again. "My God, Doc, he's coming after us for sure this time." Fred wasn't a coward, but he was sure he wouldn't like being a dead hero, either.

"Don't worry, Fred, we're just about ready to get out of here." Dr. Chester was already lowering Percy's blood-soaked head backward into his arms. He placed one hand carefully beneath her head for support and reached the other under her waist to ease her out of the seat. He moved her cautiously and carefully. "Here, Fred, can you put one hand under her head where mine is, and then the other one put under her shoulders toward the middle of them." He watched as Fred bent forward and did as instructed. "Good. That's good, Fred. Now I can put both my hands under her waist and hips and we'll get out of here."

Holding his burden, Fred couldn't avoid looking at the face of the woman he held. It was totally smeared with blood, the hair matted and clinging to her features. As

Dr. Chester suspected, in moving her, the open wound had been jarred just enough to begin oozing blood once more. Fred's stomach flipped over. She looked somehow unreal, more like one of those dummies they used in store windows than an actual living person. He never had gotten used to the sight of bleeding humanity, and he closed his eyes to block out the horror of it. Dr. Chester instinctively knew what was troubling his friend. An accident was never a pretty sight and no one ever really got used to such things, not even himself.

"FRED! GET HOLD OF YOURSELF!" he snapped.

Fred opened his eyes and looked sheepishly at Dr. Chester.

"It's okay, Fred. It's a natural reaction, only we don't have time for you to get sick right now. Don't look at her face. Don't even think of her as a woman. Just think about getting out of here quick," Dr. Chester urged. Her waist was now in the water, supported by the doctor's hand, and he was trying to ease her off the seat but she wouldn't budge any further. He pulled gently at her but it was no use. Something was stuck. Somehow there was something stuck down in the bloody water below the front seat. "Oh, dear God, please don't let her leg be jammed in there. Not now. Just don't let it happen," he prayed in silence. He didn't dare confide to Fred what his suspicion was.

On the bank, Roger shouted down to his father. "Dad," he said, "the 'gator is moving again. He's heading straight for the car this time. Can I start to throw now?"

"Yes, for God's sake, yes, Roger. Throw. THROW!" Fred tried hard not to let Roger or Sarah detect the panic he felt.

"NO!" shouted Dr. Chester. "Don't let him do it, Fred." He looked up as he explained. "We can't afford to get that thing all riled up just now. Tell Roger he's not to throw anything until the very last minute. And you can pray that we'll get lucky and he'll stop before he gets here."

"You know that's not gonna happen, Doc," Fred flashed at him. "I mean, most likely by now that 'gator's

been attracted by the blood in the water. He can probably taste it already."

"Maybe," Dr. Chester agreed. I don't know all that much about alligators. Tried to keep away from them all my life." He bent down into the water, trying to see which foot was stuck and how badly. "Have you ever seen one captured, Fred?"

"Hell no, I ain't," Fred exploded. After a minute he asked, "Have you?"

"Yes. I saw one caught one time. Down in Florida they do it as a kind of show. They grab the jaws and hold them closed. I suppose I could give it a try if worst comes to worst."

"What happens when you let go?" Fred wanted to know.

"We'd have to use the rope to tie the jaws. Just thought I'd mention it in case there's no other way out of this fix. Just thought we ought to have a plan."

"What does that mean?" Fred wanted to know. "I thought we were just about finished."

"I think her foot's caught down there," he confessed reluctantly. "I can't seem to get it loose. I'm trying to see if I can work her foot out of the shoe."

On the shore, Roger and his mother watched in fascinated horror as the alligator moved closer to the trapped auto. It was not more than about twenty feet away.

"Hurry, Fred. Can't you hurry any faster?" Sarah called to him. "He's getting so close."

Dr. Chester was nearly submerged in the water in his attempt to reach past the steering wheel and loosen Percy's foot from her sandle. He grasped her ankle firmly and twisted it gently to the right and to the left. He didn't feel it giving away and wondered if it might be secured by a strap. He hoped not. Fred tried to support her head and shoulders as best he could and still keep his eye on the approaching alligator. He couldn't prevent a slight shudder from running through his body as he saw how little distance remained between the creature and the car.

"Doc, we're going to have to leave her. That 'gator is too damn close," he told his companion.

"We can't leave her now, Fred, hanging out of the car like that. He'd get her for sure." He began to try to free Percy's shoe from under one of the pedals. He suspected that the foot had been injured in the crash because it felt thick and swollen, making his task to free it just that much more difficult. If only they were on dry land, or if only he could reach down with both hands, but the position of trying to reach Percy's foot while she was lying stretched across the seat was extremely awkward and taxing.

"Doc, I'm telling ya, we'd better hightail it out of here. Why can't we just put her back in the car and close the door? We can watch from the bridge till he goes away. It'll be a lot easier to get her out if we don't have to worry about that thing." Fred felt clammy cold with fear. He was wet from sweat inside his shirt and from the river outside. He felt sorry for the woman, sure, but the alligator was another matter.

"If he's really attracted to the blood in the water, and I admit he probably is, then he's just not going to leave here till he's found what he's after. You can see for yourself that cut on her head better be stitched up in a hurry. She's got to get to the nearest hospital just as soon as we can get her there. She's got to have blood and medicine to fight off infection, and God knows what else, Fred. I'm a doctor, Fred. I can't just walk away and leave her. Maybe I can't save her, but I've got to try all I know how to. But you can go if you want. I won't hold it against you. I don't blame you for being scared. I don't feel so great myself." Dr. Chester spoke matter-of-factly, but his tone was unmistakable. He had accepted this young woman as a patient and was willing to do whatever was required of him to help her, even if it meant a personal sacrifice.

"I couldn't do that, Doc. I couldn't leave you here alone. I'll stay. Only can you try to hurry it up?" It was one thing to leave a woman he'd never set eyes on before, and who was probably going to die in spite of all they could do, but it was another matter to turn your back and walk out on a friend when he needed your help.

"Fred, be careful. He's right on the other side of the car." Sarah was frantic. "Oh, please, please, hurry, can't you?"

"Dad," Roger called, "can I throw rocks at him yet?"

"Not yet, Fred. If he got mad and hit the car with that tail of his, he could send it sliding clear into the middle of the river. With her foot caught the way it is, she'd drown for sure. Nothing we could do then," Dr. Chester cautioned.

"No, Roger. Just wait. We're almost through," Fred shouted in reply. "No sense in scaring them, too, Doc," Fred offered by way of explanation. "How about it, Doc? Got her foot loose yet?"

"Not yet. Can't seem to budge it, Fred. I'm gonna need both hands. Can you just hold up both her head and her waist? I want to duck down in there and see what I can do with two hands."

"Okay," Fred agreed, bending forward to support Percy's waist. He watched as Dr. Chester filled his lungs with air and then ducked his head into the water beneath the steering wheel. Fred watched the small bubbles of air rise to the surface of the water. It was impossible to see what his friend was doing. The muddy water mixed with blood was a very effective screen to any activity below its surface. He felt a bump against the car and knew without looking that the alligator had hit against it on the opposite side. His fear became a lump in his throat, which he forced down with great effort. The bubbles stopped, and there didn't seem to be any movement under the steering wheel any longer. His first thought was that Dr. Chester had drowned, leaving him to fight off the alligator alone; but even as he wondered what his next move should be, Dr. Chester's head began to rise from the water, and he gasped hard for a breath of air as he stood erect.

"Okay, Fred. She's free. Now, you take her head and shoulders and just back up slowly away from the car. Just make it slow and steady and make sure your footings good. It's not going to take that alligator long before he's around here on this side of the car."

As they began to move slowly away from the auto, they felt another jolt against the passenger side. The alligator was growing impatient.

"Just don't panic, Fred. We can make it. You're doing fine." Doc kept up a constant stream of encouragement as

they made their way to the shore. "Okay. You're there. Now, we've got to get her up this bank to the blankets." They had reached the edge of the water, and Dr. Chester was doing his best to keep Percy's body level. Slowly and cautiously, they edged their way up the bank, carrying Percy between them, until they reached the level spot where the blankets had been spread. In unison the two men knelt on the ground, gradually lowering their burden as they did so. Sarah and Roger had begun to run toward them, but as Sarah caught sight of the injured woman, she wheeled Roger about and ordered him to wait in the station wagon. There was no use subjecting the boy to that sight, she reasoned.

Dr. Chester wrapped the blankets about Percy as securely as he could. They were partly to keep her warm and partly to give her body extra support in carrying her up the rest of the bank of the river. He grabbed for the rope and tied it securely about her. His hands seemed awkward and slow to respond to his wishes, but at last it was done and he knotted each end.

"If it's all right with you, Fred, I think we ought to put her in the back of your station wagon and head right for the hospital in Charleston. That's the best thing to do, I think." Dr. Chester was in control of the situation now, thinking ahead rapidly. He wished futilely that he had some blood plasma.

"Whatever you say, Doc," Fred agreed, happy to be away from the water and the stalking alligator. He stole one last look at the pursuer they had barely managed to escape. The alligator, in its search for the source of fresh blood, had found its way around the car and was now crawling onto the front seat of the car. "Look at that crazy thing, Doc," Fred said.

"He can't find the victim he knows should be there," Dr. Chester explained, glancing at the creature threshing about in the water, switching his tail from side to side in a movement of such force that the car began to slide backward in the slimy silt beneath its wheels. "It's gonna take him a couple of minutes to find out what he's looking for isn't there. Then he's gonna follow the trail of blood up to

here. We'd better get out of here in a hurry. She's ready to carry now."

"I'm sure ready to leave here," Fred exclaimed, bending down to lift Percy again.

"Uh, wait a minute, Fred. I guess I better wrap that wound in something." Dr. Chester pulled off his shirt. With it he bandaged Percy's head crudely but quickly. "Okay, Fred, gentle now but don't waste any time," he instructed.

The alligator, on its short, stubby legs, began to make its way toward them on the river bank. With unspoken agreement, the two men, breathing hard, struggled to climb in unison as they carried their burden to the top of the sloping ground. Only then did they dare look back. The alligator paused when it reached the spot where Percy's head had been. The ground was spotted with blood, and the alligator searched for the source of it. In frustration, it opened its jaws and let forth an angry bel- low, switching its tail from side to side with such violence that it snapped in two the large branch of a tree which had fallen and lay on the bank of the river. Dr. Chester and Fred were happy not to have to tangle with that adversary.

Carefully they placed Percy in the back end of the station wagon. Dr. Chester climbed in beside her and began to feel for her pulse.

"Sarah, you and Roger can use my car to get home. There's no need for you to come along to the hospital," he said. As soon as they were clear of the auto, he told Fred, "You'd better drive as fast as you can. Don't pay no heed to the speed limits as long as you drive safely. Any trouble with the police, I'll be responsible. Now get going." Fred was in the driver's seat and starting the engine. "Just remember, though, that we don't want another accident on the way, you hear?"

"Don't you worry about me, Doc," Fred replied as he expertly maneuvered the car about, heading in the direction of Charleston. "Don't wait supper for me, Sarah. No telling when I'll get back," he called as the car pulled away and across the bridge.

Roger and his mother took one last look at the alligator

twisting and turning below them, growling in frustration and anger. Sarah put her arm about her son's shoulders and gave him a comforting pat. There was nothing either of them felt like saying as they made their way to Dr. Chester's car. They felt very close, very sad, and very helpless. The sight of the injured woman had been a terrible shock to Roger and a sad one for his mother. Probably she was someone's mother, but whose? They had no idea who she might be or what she was doing on this country road. Roger wanted to ask his mother if she thought the lady would live, but he didn't dare. He was afraid of what his mother might tell him, and he didn't want to think about her dying.

Fred drove carefully and skillfully along the country road so familiar to him. Once he reached the highway, he was able to push the speedometer up to seventy miles an hour and race along. He and Doc spoke very little on the trip. Once he asked about the passenger and Doc answered that there was no change. Doc Chester had mixed feelings about the victim. He'd feel better if she showed some sign of being aware of what was happening to her. It would be good to have an indication her brain was still functioning. He was worried about that. No telling what kind of damage that blow to her head had done. Even if she complained about being in pain, it would be a good sign. But he didn't have anything with him to ease the pain—that was something else. It wouldn't be good to have her awake and suffer without any medication to give her; so it was probably best, after all, that she had fallen into a coma. He kept his fingers pressed to her wrist, trying to keep track of the pulse, which was slow but steady. He fumbled for a sleeve of the shirt that was wrapped about her head. It had done its job in helping to slow the flow of blood. At least it didn't appear to be flowing as freely. With the sleeve he wiped her face and was surprised to realize that she was a remarkably pretty young woman. Until now he thought of her only as a medical case in need of urgent assistance. It wasn't important, but he wondered who she was.

They were barely across the Santee River when Fred noticed a police car racing behind them. As he heard the

siren begin its wail, he said, "I've got to pull over, Doc. The police found us."

It required only a few words of explanation and one look at Percy for the police officer to decide this was a genuine emergency. He wasted no time and snapped instructions for Fred to follow him closely. Off they sped again, this time with a police escort leading the way. The siren wailed as they approached a traffic problem, and they zigzagged their way through it. Fred pushed hard on the gas to keep pace with the speeding police car ahead of him. When they were within a few blocks of the hospital, the police car zipped away from them and into the small parking lot reserved for the emergency-room use. As Fred pulled up to the emergency-room door, there were two orderlies waiting for them with a stretcher ready to receive the injured Percy. The policeman stood beside them. As he watched the patient being transferred from the station-wagon floor to the stretcher, the policeman told Dr. Chester that he could be counted on if any blood was needed. The doctor thanked him for the offer and made a mental note of it as he hurried off to follow the men carrying the stretcher; Fred tagged along behind him.

Inside, Dr. Chester turned to Fred and told him, "I don't know how long this is going to take, Fred. You can go on home if you want to, and thanks a lot for your help. Maybe sometime we'll go hunting for that alligator." Dr. Chester smiled.

"No, sir, not me, Doc. But I think I'll hang around till you find out how bad off she is. I know Sarah and the boy would like to know, too."

"Sure, I understand, but I can't make any promises when that'll be. I don't imagine they'll let me take on the case, anyhow. I'm not registered to practice in this hospital, but a good friend of mine is. I'd like to be in on the examinations if they'll let me. Why don't you have some coffee, you've earned it. I'll let you know as soon as I can."

"Come on, mister, I'll even buy you a cup," said the officer who had accompanied them. He and Fred headed for the hospital cafeteria.

Percy was wheeled into the emergency room that had

been waiting for her. Dr. Chester found her there. To the orderly standing beside her bed, he said, "She's had a bad auto accident, lost a lot of blood. So she's gonna need a lot of plasma. Get someone down here right away from the lab and have them rush through the blood samples as quick as they can. Then we can worry about what else needs to be done." The orderly just stared at him, making no effort to move. "Hurry," Dr. Chester said impatiently.

"Just who do you think you are, mister?" The orderly asked in anger. "I don't know what you think you're doing, but I'm the doctor here. I'll decide what has to be done. You go and wait in the room outside. We'll let you know what tests are done after they're finished. By the way, what's your wife's name?"

"She's not my wife, and I haven't the vaguest notion who she is. I happen to be Dr. Chester from Plantersville. We found her at the scene of the accident and rushed her here. I've already done a brief examination, so I do know what I'm talking about. She's gonna die and pretty quick if you don't do what I say." Dr. Chester was angry too.

"I'm sorry," the intern apologized. "I had no way to tell you were a doctor. We get a lot of hysterical relatives in here, you know. I just assumed you were her husband. I'll get someone down from the lab right away."

Dr. Chester was appeased. "Is Dr. Radcliffe on duty tonight?"

"I really don't know. He may be on call. Should I inquire at the desk?"

"Yes, and have them get in touch with him whether he is or not," Dr. Chester ordered.

The orderly looked surprised at this last request.

"It's all right. We're old friends. Please tell the desk that when they have him on the phone, I'd like to talk to him. I'll stay with the patient till you get back, though."

"It's against the hospital rules to make a direct call to a physician, Dr. Chester. They can call his service if you like."

"All right, all right. Have them do it right away. Leave my name and have him call me here," Dr. Chester directed.

The orderly nodded that he understood.

It took awhile before Dr. Chester received the expected telephone call. Dr. Radcliffe was one of the best surgeons at the hospital, and Dr. Chester knew that if his friend would accept her the young woman would have the best possible care. At his friend's urging, Dr. Radcliffe agreed to rush to the hospital and see what he could do for the victim. He spoke to the orderly and gave instructions that they were to prepare the girl for surgery while he was on his way. He wanted no unnecessary delays. Dr. Chester walked slowly back to the room where Percy waited, feeling that a great weight had been lifted from his own shoulders. He had done all he could for her, placed her in the best surgical hands in the area.

In the time it took Dr. Radcliffe to arrive, the operation of the hospital had begun in earnest for Percy. Her blood was already tested and typed, and she was receiving plasma. A nurse was in the process of shaving her head, preparatory to surgery. She was scheduled for a full set of X rays, and there was a technician waiting for her there. Dr. Chester remembered that her right ankle was badly swollen and possibly broken. He examined it and found that he was correct. He had the intern examine the ankle and notify the orthopedic surgeon on duty, a Dr. Mathews. The intern and Dr. Chester explained the case to Dr. Mathews and informed him that she was scheduled for surgery as soon as Dr. Radcliffe arrived. Since the head injury was by far more serious, Dr. Mathews thought it best to wait until after the operation and asked to see the X rays as soon as they were available. Percy was unaware of the flurry of activity around her.

Dr. Radcliffe entered the room briskly. He greeted his friend Dr. Chester and said that he could see no reason why Dr. Chester should not be allowed to watch the operation if he wished. Dr. Radcliffe understood why the recovery of the victim was of special interest to his medical friend.

In surgical gown, Dr. Chester stood at Percy's feet as the doctors and nurses, under the intense glare of the monstrous overhead lights, began to probe and examine the wound, working with exacting precision. Finally, Dr. Radcliffe was able to stitch up the wound as though she

were a rag doll that had only needed its stuffing renewed. Fortunately, the X rays showed no spinal injury, which Dr. Chester had feared, but they were inconclusive as far as other possible internal injuries were concerned. The doctors could only wait and see what might develop in the next day or two. The operation performed by Dr. Radcliffe lasted more than two hours, and when he was finished, Dr. Mathews began to work at setting Percy's ankle. It was another hour before Percy was ready to be wheeled out of the operating room and into recovery.

Dr. Radcliffe directed that she be placed in the intensive-care unit and an intravenous feeding be started and a tube inserted through her nose to drain off the waste and poison from her stomach and intestines. For the moment they would do nothing else, merely keep a close watch on her to catch any new developments or complications.

In the elevator on the way down from the operating room, Dr. Radcliffe asked his friend, "Did she have any identification when you found her?"

"She didn't have anything in her pockets—at least the nurse who checked through her clothing said there was nothing. We didn't have a chance to look through the car. It was such a struggle to get her out of that seat. And on top of it, an alligator started after the trail of blood. We were mighty lucky to get out of there before he got us," Dr. Chester explained. "But she must have had a pocket-book or something like that with a driver's license. She was in the driver's seat—the only person in the car. They're sure to find it when they drag the car out of the river—that is, unless that 'gator knocked it off the seat and into the river."

"When are they going to bring up the car, do you know?"

"I don't know, but I would guess tomorrow," Dr. Chester offered. "Does it matter?"

"We have to notify her family. Whoever she is, they have to be informed, and the sooner the better. Her chances aren't great at the moment, I guess you're aware of that."

Dr. Chester nodded in agreement.

"It might make a difference in her recovery chances if she had her family with her."

"Do you think she would know? I mean, do you think her brain is still functioning?" Dr. Chester asked.

"I can't tell. I hope so. There's a good chance," Dr. Radcliffe answered matter-of-factly.

"Do you have an estimate as to how long it ought to take her before she comes out of this coma?"

"Not the slightest," Dr. Radcliffe answered. "It'll depend on just how badly her brain has been damaged—if at all. As long as she remains unconscious, there's not much we can find out and there not a whole lot we can do. For awhile, we just have to let nature help in the healing and take all the precautions we can that we haven't overlooked something. Not knowing the patient's medical history, we have to be careful that she doesn't die from some allergic reaction to the medicine she's getting. And, of course, we have to watch out for pneumonia." The two men stopped at the front desk as Dr. Radcliffe added, "You can come in and see her anytime you like, Randall. I'll leave instructions at the ICU desk. Naturally I'll get in touch with you if there's any change."

"I'd appreciate it," Dr. Chester replied, "and thanks for taking the case, Bill."

"If she recovers, then you can thank me," he replied.

The two doctors shook hands and Dr. Chester headed for the cafeteria just in case Fred was still waiting for him there, and in search of a cup of coffee.

It had been a long wait for Fred, but he couldn't bring himself to leave. Dr. Chester's news about the young woman was not what he had hoped to hear. Still, she was alive and in the hands of a doctor with a very fine reputation. It was after nine o'clock in the evening when the two men climbed into Fred's station wagon and headed back toward Plantersville. It seemed a week since they made the frantic dash to the hospital.

At nine-fifteen Gordon stepped from his plane and made his way into the airport terminal. His eyes swept the area as he entered the building, trying to locate his wife among the throng of people, but she was nowhere in view. Gordon spent several minutes wandering through the ter-

minal looking for her, and he was more than a little disappointed not to find her waiting for him. It just didn't seem possible that she could have forgotten what time his plane was due to arrive. He brushed the thought aside as soon as it sprang to his mind. Percy was one of the most dependable persons he knew. But where could she be? Delayed, possibly, but why? It didn't take long to exhaust his patience, and he decided to have her paged. As her name was announced over the loudspeaker with instructions to come to the Information Desk, he searched the faces of the people walking through the terminal. For a good ten minutes, he stood at the desk and waited for her to approach him. It just wasn't like Percy at all. What could it be? Traffic? That didn't seem likely. Could she be ill? No, she would have left a message for him. Amnesia? Now he was getting ridiculous.

Gordon sank into a chair and looked at his watch. It was ten minutes before ten. He would give her just ten more minutes. The time crept by while he turned over in his mind all the possible reasons she might have for being so late. Then, as the ten minutes drew to an end, he considered all the reasons he could imagine for her not appearing at all. None of them appealed to him. It didn't make sense. The clock on the wall over his head showed it was now ten, and Gordon rose abruptly to his feet. That was it! It was time to get out of this place. It was possible, not very likely but just possible, that she had stretched out in the motel room to take a short nap and hadn't awakened in time. The thing to do was call the motel where she was staying.

He searched through his pockets for the phone number, found a phone booth, and dialed the motel. He asked for her room and waited as the phone rang—three, four, five, six times. Gordon hung up and dialed the motel again. The desk clerk was no help. He did not know Mrs. Brooks and had no idea where she might be if not in her room. So much for that idea. Gordon's irritation was now beginning to be edged with alarm. What could have happened to Percy? In just one afternoon how much could have happened to her? Then he remembered Angie, and wondered if she arrived home as scheduled. At least if she

were home, she might know what Percy planned to do during the day, where she might be. As he dialed the phone again and waited for someone to pick up the phone at the Browning apartment, he searched the faces of the people passing the booth in the vain hope that Percy might rush in at the last minute.

"Hello." Angie's voice came to him over the wire.

"Angie, this is Gordon." He tried to sound casual. "I called to make sure you'd gotten home all right."

"Yes, I'm fine, Gordon. I made it back safe and sound. We had a marvelous time, but Percy can tell you all that," she said. "What a surprise to hear from you. Nothing's wrong, I hope."

"As a matter of fact, that's really why I'm calling, Angie. Percy didn't meet me at the airport. I landed over an hour ago, and she hasn't arrived yet. I wondered if you might know where she could be," he said.

"Did you try the room?" she offered.

"Yes, I did that before I called you, thought maybe she'd fallen asleep or something, but she wasn't there. I spoke to the desk clerk but he didn't know anything about her. I had her paged here, but she didn't show. So I didn't know what else to try but to call you."

"I'm sorry, Gordon, I just don't know what to tell you."

"Well, do you know what she planned to do this afternoon?"

"Yes, when she left me at the airport, she said she was going to spend the day at the beach—Myrtle Beach. We had been there earlier in the week, and she thought she might go back and relax for the day. I thought it was a great idea. It's just an ocean beach but very nice. She wouldn't stay there after dark, though. The only other thing she talked about was to stop at one old place—mansion or gardens, I don't know exactly what it was. I didn't think it would be as good for her as the beach, and when I left, she had changed her mind about that. So, I just don't know what to say, Gordon."

"Thanks anyway, Angie. She'll turn up, I'm sure, but I thought I ought to check with you. I just can't understand why she didn't leave a message for me here," he said.

"Maybe she left a message for you back in the room," Angie suggested.

"That's possible, I suppose. Still—" Ordinarily, Percy would have made absolutely certain there was a message for him the moment he stopped from the plane, but Percy had not behaved in an ordinary manner this last winter, and he realized how absurd it was to expect her to do so now. The whole purpose of the trip was to bring her back to normal. And, Angie might just be right about the message in the motel room. It was, at least, a place to start.

"Angie, level with me, please. How was she this last week?"

"Fine, Gordon. She was really just fine. She was happy and interested in everything we did and every place we went. It was just like it used to be, almost." She paused for a moment before adding, "There were only a couple of times that she seemed to be distracted—in a funny kind of way—I guess as if she were deep in thought, you know. It wasn't anything to be concerned about, and she came out of it right away. I thought she was just fine."

"Good, I'm glad to hear that. I just . . . wondered how she was . . . Did she mention Damon Aarons at all?" he wanted to know.

"No . . . No, she didn't mention him at all. At least, I don't recall that she did. Why, Gordon?"

"Listen, Angie, I don't want to upset you, nothing like that, dear, but did she seem alert and—uh—in control of herself? I mean her mind—was it clear? Was it—well, is it possible that she might have suffered a mental lapse, a mental breakdown of some kind?" Awful as the thought was, it had to be faced if she didn't show up.

"Good heavens no, Gordon. Percy was so far from having a nervous breakdown." It wasn't possible that the happy, cheerful woman she waved good-bye to that morning could have suffered a mental breakdown in the few short hours that she was left alone. "No, Gordon. It just couldn't be. If I had seen any sign of anything like that, I wouldn't have left her alone. She was really just fine," Angie insisted.

"Thanks, Angie. I'll keep in touch and let you know

what happened to her when she turns up. I'm sure there's some very simple explanation—I just can't think of what it is. Guess I'll go to the motel. Good night, Angie, and don't worry."

"Gordon, do you want me to come back?" she offered.

"No, of course not, Angie. There's nothing you could do here that I can't do. It was probably ridiculous of me to call, but I just thought you might know where she had gone. Maybe she had a flat tire on the road back from the beach. I'll find her. Don't worry, and we'll call you before we fly on to Jamaica in the morning. Good night, Angie." He hung up the phone and sat for another minute or two just waiting for something to happen—he didn't know exactly what. He went through his pockets and found the baggage claim checks. There didn't seem to be any reason to hang around the terminal, so he picked up his luggage and climbed into a cab and headed for the motel.

The motel room supplied him with neither his wife nor a clue to where she might be. He sank into the chair in the room and tried to think rationally about what should be his next step. Again he toyed with the idea that she might have suffered a mental breakdown. If it happened while she was on the beach, she might have wound up in a hospital miles away. They never should have left her alone, he could see that now. In any case, he would have to go to the police and get their help in locating her. He wondered if he should have the desk clerk check the hospitals for him. Neither prospect was very cheering, but they had to be pursued.

The night clerk at the desk was pleasant and tried to be helpful. He had come on duty at four that afternoon and he did not know Mrs. Brooks on sight, so he couldn't say if she had passed his desk or not. But if she was really missing, and Mr. Brooks was genuinely worried about her, he would be happy to see if the police could supply any information about her.

"Could you check with the hospitals first?" Gordon requested. "I hate to involve the police unless it's really necessary."

"I understand, sir," the young man replied. He made several phone calls while Gordon leaned against the desk.

When he was through, he shook his head at Gordon. "That's all the hospitals, sir, but there's no Percy Brooks or Mrs. Gordon Brooks who's been admitted to any of them in the last twenty-four hours. You did say your sister-in-law was with your wife this morning, didn't you?"

"That's right. My wife drove her sister to the airport this morning."

"Well, I had them all check their records for the last twenty-four hours. She's not listed as a patient in any of them," said the clerk.

"Thanks very much, anyway," Gordon replied, nodding his head.

"Would you like me to check with the police now?" the young clerk asked.

"Yes, I suppose that's the only thing to do," Gordon agreed.

A check with the police revealed that there was no information on a Mrs. Percy or Mrs. Gordon Brooks, and they knew of no fatalities caused by accident in the last twenty-four hours. Gordon breathed a bit easier on hearing that piece of news. Still, it didn't solve the absence of Percy; it only served to deepen the mystery of what might have happened to her, where she might be.

"The police want you to come down to the station and file a report on your wife," the clerk told Gordon.

"Why?" Gordon asked.

"They need to have one before they can start looking for her," the clerk informed him. "I guess they want a description in detail, habits, peculiarities, anything that might give them a clue about where to look for her."

"I see," said Gordon wondering what he could safely tell the police about the peculiar behavior of his wife.

"Would you like me to call a taxi for you?" asked the clerk.

Gordon nodded his head thoughtfully. He didn't seem to have any alternative left to him but this. He would have no way of knowing where to look by himself. Sooner or later, he would need the assistance of the police. It might as well be now.

He gave the police a detailed physical description of his wife and left a picture of Percy and the two children for

them. He told them that she was driving a rented car and planned to spend the day at a place called Myrtle Beach. They knew the beach. No, he couldn't supply them with a description of the kind of car she was driving. Methodically, they filed a report, taking down the information they thought might be helpful and ignoring the rest. The police sergeant promised that they would do what they could and suggested that Gordon return to the hotel and get some sleep. They wouldn't have any information on her until the following day at the very earliest. As soon as they found out anything, they would be in touch with Gordon at his motel, but he could check with them tomorrow about noon if it would ease his mind any. Gordon took a taxi back to the motel but found it impossible to relax.

Officer Brinson had listened carefully to the exchange between Gordon and Sergeant Landers, who wrote up the report. His eyes followed Gordon as he walked out of the police station and stood waiting on the curb for his taxi. Brinson crossed the room to the desk where Landers was still bent over his work, making notes on the paper. "You don't suppose that could be the woman who was hurt in the car wreck up near Plantersville, do you?"

The sergeant looked up from his work and considered the question for several seconds before he replied. "Naw. What made you think of that? This guy said his wife was spending the day on the beach. Plantersville is in the other direction, away from the beach."

"Well, maybe she got lost."

"How could she miss the highway? It's just not possible to miss getting on the highway from Myrtle Beach."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," agreed Officer Brinson.

"This guy's wife is a tourist. Why would a tourist want to go to Plantersville? That doesn't make any sense. At least not to me it doesn't. There's nothing to see in Plantersville. She'll turn up somewhere. Who knows, maybe she's mad at him for some reason. Maybe she went to a movie to teach him a lesson just so she didn't have to meet his plane. There's bound to be some kind of a mixup. Tomorrow they'll probably both be in here telling

us it was all a mistake—she was one place and he was another."

"Yeah, ain't it the truth, ain't it the truth." Officer Brinson chuckled, remembering how many times just such a thing had happened before.

But tomorrow was a long time away for Gordon. He showered, he paced the floor, he tried to straighten out his thoughts, and he tried to sleep. He couldn't make sense out of the facts no matter how he laid them out. And not being able to make sense of them, he had no idea what to do or how to go about it. Somewhere toward morning, his mind began to wander as sleep crept slowly up to him. He drifted into slumber, and in his dream he saw Percy and Damon Aarons standing together beside his bed, hand in hand and smiling down at him as though they shared some marvelous secret they were not willing to have him share. In the dream, he tried to pull Percy away from Aarons, but she resisted, refusing to let go of his hand. In the morning when Gordon woke, he recalled the dream in vivid detail. He wondered if there was any significance to it. It was probably just something his unconscious mind conjured up from desperation, still it was a possibility which refused to fade from his thoughts. Why hadn't it occurred to him before? Was it conceivable that left alone in this Southern city, Percy had, somehow, transferred herself back into the time that enveloped Dr. Aarons? It was preposterous. How could she? She knew nothing about such things—still, she had done a great deal of reading this past winter on subjects that involved the supernatural. Absurd as the idea seemed and hard as he tried to dismiss it from his mind, the possibility nagged at him as he went about the task of dressing.

Later in the morning, when he thought it would be a reasonable hour to arrive, he went again to the police station. There was no information on his wife, he was informed. The police had inquired about her as far south as Savannah, Georgia, down the coast. No one answering her description had come to the notice of the police there. All the police patrols in the area were notified to be on the alert for her. The rental agency reported that the car had not been returned. None of the hospitals within a hundred

miles listed her among their patients who had been admitted in the last forty-eight hours. There was little else the police could do. She seemed to have disappeared.

As he left the police station, Gordon again thought of the dream in which he saw Percy and Dr. Aarons. It refused to leave his mind for more than a few minutes at a time. Was Percy trying to tell him something? He shook his head vigorously. If he was to find her, he would have to maintain a level head and keep his mind from wandering into some ridiculous speculation. That dream was just a dream. It was absurd to think it meant anything more than that. But hard as he tried to convince himself, Gordon's mind stubbornly clung to the possibility that such a thing might be the answer. No one disappeared without leaving a trace unless—unless— By the time he was again in his motel room, Gordon was almost convinced that it had to be the answer. Damon Aarons had gone without leaving evidence of his whereabouts, and now Percy had vanished—just vanished. Was it too farfetched to suppose that wherever Aarons was, Percy was also? But where did that leave Gordon? How was he to get her back from somewhere in time and space? It was sheer lunacy and he couldn't see himself explaining this to the police. He should have known. What a stupid fool he had been to leave her alone in a strange city in the first place—she had been trying to contact Dr. Aarons through her extrasensory powers all winter. But who would have suspected that Charleston, South Carolina, would hold any relevancy to Dr. Aarons? Percy seemed to have given up on her attempt to reach him when she agreed to the trip. She seemed to be recovering. But what other possibility was there? Where else could she be? In desperation, he thought of Sam and Claire White. They were the only people he knew who would understand his suspicions and not think he had lost his mind. They were the only people he knew to turn to for help.

Gordon made his decision quickly, reasoning that if he had time to consider it, he would change his mind. He put through a call to New York City, where Sam and Claire lived. Claire answered the phone with a cheerful "Hello." As coherently as possible, Gordon explained what had

happened and what he had begun to suspect it might mean. Claire listened attentively to all he had to say. She made no comment when he revealed the dream of the night before and how it haunted him. When he finished, she did not respond immediately but sat staring out the window trying to put the pieces in their proper order and see what she could make of it herself by means of cold, detached logic. She found that her feminine intuition kept bumping against the logic and pushing it askew, and she was inclined to feel that instead of being preposterous, Gordon's suspicions might be rather accurate.

"What do you think we ought to do, Gordon?" she asked at length.

"I don't know, Claire. I don't even know why I called you except that I knew you would understand. What do you think about it?" he asked.

"I'm afraid you might be right. But I don't think there's much we can do from here in New York. Let me talk to Sam and see if we can arrange to join you in Charleston," she volunteered.

"I know it's a lot to ask, but I'd appreciate it if you could," he replied.

"It seems the only thing to do. I'd like to talk to Elena about this if you don't mind," she told him.

"Whatever you think would be best, but I'd feel an awful fool if Percy turned up somewhere around here after you did."

"You may be right. We have to be very careful not to panic about Percy because of what happened to Damon."

"That's the worst part, Claire. I may be jumping to totally absurd conclusions. She may have suffered a temporary amnesia or some kind of a temporary breakdown and be wandering around helpless. I just don't have the vaguest notion what really happened to her, but I knew you wouldn't feel I was crazy for calling you. I suspect Elena might think the whole idea is ridiculous."

"I understand, Gordon. I'll talk to Sam first. He has a good, level head on his shoulders. Then we'll see about Elena. Should I call you later this afternoon to find out how things are down there? I can let you know then what

I've been able to arrange about coming down and whether Sam will be with me."

"That's a good idea, Claire. I'll probably stick close to the phone today anyhow. And you know that if there's anything to report, I'll get in touch with you right away," he said.

That was the way they left it. It did seem farfetched for a grown man to think that his wife might have taken a trip backward in time, but Gordon couldn't put the thought out of his mind.

CHAPTER VII

Aaron Burr returned from his rugged and strenuous trip to the Floridas as brown as any Indian he had ever seen. He had gone searching for adventure and found not only adventure but a possible future for himself as well. The substance of it had been in his mind for some while, but the trip had served to crystallize that substance into a more specific plan, a plan so grandiose that his past accomplishments were pale in comparison. There, in the wilderness, he had seen a Spanish civilization in miniature, for the Louisiana Territory had once been a Spanish colony. And beyond the Floridas, which was only a small portion of that territory—ah, beyond the Floridas, indeed, lay the entire remainder of the Louisiana Territory, an expanse of land so vast that no one knew for certain its boundaries. He had but glimpsed the beginning of that expanse. To the South lay Texas and Mexico as well. He needed only the proper financing and good men under his command, and he would be able to carve for himself and his descendants an empire.

It was no idle dream on his part, but an actual concrete possibility for the future. On his own merits he was well liked, accepted as an intellectual leader . . . He had the ability to draw men to him. If his summer in Georgia accomplished no more, it had convinced him that he had lost none of his appealing charm. Why should he subject himself to the sneers of lesser men and the position of outcast in the history of the United States? At forty-nine he was in the prime of his life, the prime of his health. Why allow his once-promising political career to be tossed away so lightly by others, and all for the death of Hamil-

ton? He would make his own future in his own country. He would make himself Emperor Aaron I. A dynasty would be established and Theodosia's husband, Joseph, would rule after his death; then the throne would be passed to Aaron II, his grandson.

The plan filled him with such excitement that he could hardly wait to confide in Theo herself. She would most readily applaud this great plan, as she did everything else her father ever undertook. But caution—patience—he told himself. While he was still Vice-President of the United States, he must tread very carefully and choose with great care those to whom he might confide his plan. Excepting Theo, only those people who could be counted on to lend assistance to him in bringing it about must even suspect what he was undertaking, and each of them would be apprized only of that portion which concerned them personally. The trap must not be sprung before it was properly set for fear that he himself might be caught in it. The whole plan must be kept very secret. A code would be helpful, he decided, or perhaps more than one code. One code might be too easily broken if any letters were intercepted or went astray. Yes, more than one code would be good . . . but then, perhaps best of all, would be several different codes. Why not, for the sake of safety, devise a different code for each person with whom he must communicate? What a spectacular idea! In that way, he would be the only person in command of every detail of the operation.

Burr was intrigued with the ingenuity of such a plan. He loved the complexity of it. How he longed to reveal this scheme to Theo and bask in her praise. Delighting his exceedingly brilliant daughter was one of the true joys of his life. Yes, she would approve of a code for each one of his associates. And he must personally devise them in such a way as to keep their secret locked in his mind, writing down no system for decoding, leaving no evidence for curious eyes to find. That would be unsafe and negate the plan entirely. These thoughts brightened his days on the return trip from the Floridas to Savannah.

At Savannah he decided to abandon the journey by canoe and continue on by horseback. The journey by land

would be much faster, and he yearned to greet his adoring daughter and his adored grandson. No sooner had he and his boatman come ashore than he was recognized as he asked for suitable lodging. The word of his arrival spread rapidly through the city. The good citizens of Savannah refused to allow him to depart without being properly received. They were most insistent that he tarry in their city to sample their generous hospitality. The trip to Charleston and to Theo had to be delayed for several days as he found himself deluged with invitations to teas, to dinners, to evening entertainments, and even to a ball where he was the honored guest.

It being October, the winter season in Savannah had just begun and the festivities which had necessarily been forsworn through the oppressive heat of the long summer were now embraced with renewed enthusiasm. Once more, Aaron Burr, Vice-President of the United States, was treated as though he were visiting royalty, as the inhabitants of Savannah outdid themselves on his behalf. The warm reception he experienced on the little island of St. Simons earlier could not compare with the lavish welcome he now received. He was presented with gifts of all descriptions, which he graciously accepted. When, at length, he mentioned that he was growing impatient to continue on to his daughter in Charleston that he might spend a few days in her company before being obliged to return to his duties at the capital, he was presented with a horse, a very handsome animal, with which to make the trip.

The roads were dry, hard packed from being well traveled, which made the journey by horse a simple matter. The air was brisk and bracing, and Aaron Burr was in a highly exhilarated state of mind as he drove his animal hard along the road to Charleston. As he approached the city, he slowed his mount to a halt.

Every time he encountered this city, he was smitten with the unsurpassed beauty of it. It was built on the tip of land between the Ashley and the Cooper rivers—in this regard its physical layout was reminiscent of his own New York, which lay at the tip of the Manhattan Island. But he could think of no other city which compared with

Charleston in the beauty of its houses and the splendor of decor and tasteful furnishings. And, certainly, there was nothing to compare with the lavish flower gardens of Charleston. The several churches all showed remarkable good taste in their design and some of them displayed considerable wealth in their adornment. St. Philips was the oldest and most outstanding of the churches, but he had a particular fondness for St. Michaels, which stood at Meeting and Broad streets. St. Michaels was designed to resemble St. Martins-in-the-Fields, in London. Since 1764, the clock in its tower, with a primitive system of wooden cogs, rope and weights, had been the arbiter of the city's time, as its mellow chimes announced the hour. There was also a Huguenot Church, a Circular Church, and a Quaker Church, as well as several Presbyterian meetinghouses and a synagogue. Aaron smiled to think that the souls of the inhabitants of Charleston were so well protected. Charleston also had a Library Society, which had been organized in 1748, housing a sizable collection of admirable books which they made available to the public. There was a charming theater and the usual assortment of buildings which housed the offices of the city government.

There was a marvelous similarity in design among the buildings of the town, so that each seemed to be a part of the whole city, yet each was lovely in its own way. Many of the best houses were situated along the Cooper River and the North Bay, a goodly number of them with porticoes of Ionic and Doric pillars, which lent a most impressive air. Usually these homes did not face the streets, as was customary in the north, but instead were situated so that the side of the house was to the street, the actual front then faced the lawn, or more likely a meticulously tended garden. Across the front there usually was built a piazza on both the first and second floors, which overlooked the garden and provided shade from the hot afternoon sun. Large windows on each end of the house had been placed to take advantage of the breezes to provide the house with some comfort.

Many of the wealthy plantation owners who had their vast lush-green rice plantations in the lowlands beyond

Charleston also maintained homes in the city for their use from October through April or May, making Charleston in the winter a busy and socially festive city, crammed full of balls, parties, elegant dinners, and theater evenings. The Alston family home was the most impressive square Georgian structure on King Street. It was used off and on by the entire contingent of Alstons when they found it convenient, although each had his own home in the city as well. There were possibly forty-five mansions in Charleston, and the Alston home on King was among the handsomest.

By the time he was within the city limits, Aaron Burr felt dirty and fatigued from his journey, and it seemed a good idea to stop at the King Street house in the hope that Theodosia and Joseph might be there. Instead, he was most graciously received by Joseph's father, Colonel William Alston, who informed him that it was regrettable, but Theodosia did not feel strong enough at the moment to join in the activity of the city. She and Joseph preferred to remain at The Oaks until she felt able to participate in the social life with her accustomed gaiety. Colonel Alston insisted that Aaron accept his hospitality and remain in Charleston as his guest. Aaron received the invitation with gratitude. He had been traveling hard and fast and long on his journey northward from Savannah, and he had used whatever reserve of energy and enthusiasm was at his command. He looked forward with pleasure to being able to sit upon a soft cushion which did not jog up and down beneath him.

On rising in the morning, he felt remarkably refreshed. He made apologies for the brevity of his visit and thanked his host for his courtesy. By midmorning, he was well on the road to The Oaks, passing by the estates of Windsor Hill, Courtlands, White Hall, Runnymede, Drayton Hall, and Ashley, which lined the road beyond Charleston, as the river turned the land to marshes particularly well suited to the growing of the rice. Ships sailed up and down the river, stopping at the private wharves of each plantation for the loading of rice, which supplied the wealth of the plantation owners. There was a hanging humid feeling in the air as the dampness of the marshes

created a stale, musty odor. What a dreadful haven of pestilence this land must be in the steamy summer months, he thought. I would never consent to have Theo remain here if she were not able to retreat to their summer home on Debordieu Island. He had never been with her during the summer, and therefore, had never been to the house on Debordieu, but she had written him of the house and the island. The house must have a certain simple charm to it and her life there was far more casual and relaxed than at any other time of the year. He knew that the island was one of the string off the coast of South Carolina near Charleston, and remembering his own summer spent at St. Simons was certain that Theo would fare well in such an environment. He knew, instinctively, that he would prefer for her the life on Debordieu rather than the atmosphere of the marshy lowlands of the rice plantations.

As he looked about him, everywhere the trees were draped with gray-green moss, which hung from them like great shaggy beards. Beneath the trees was the lush green growth of the flat marshes. Every so often a snake would slither among the decaying underbrush or an alligator could be detected moving in the distance. A traveler must be constantly on the alert against the danger these repulsive creatures presented. The whole environment seemed unhealthy and unfit for human existence. Had he been able to do so, Aaron Burr would have reached out to pluck up his daughter and swing her astride the horse behind him to gallop without stopping back to their home in Richmond Hill, where she had so blossomed and thrived. Then he remembered that Richmond Hill was his no more. In a climate like this it was no small wonder that she was frequently ill. Still, she complained little about her indisposition.

Love had brought her to the South, her love for Joseph. Of all her suitors—and there had been many—she had chosen to marry young Joseph Alston and would not be dissuaded from her decision even though it meant that she must leave her doting father to journey to South Carolina as his bride. That she was happy with her husband was beyond question, and he likewise with her. With

the birth of Aaron Burr Alston, their joy should have been complete, but Theodosia became ill with what the doctor diagnosed as a prolapsed uterus. Now the robust health she had enjoyed in her youth was beyond her grasp. What a fickle thing is health, thought Burr, remembering how healthy and vivacious Theodosia's mother had been when they were first married and how dreadfully she had suffered during the last few years of her life.

Aaron Burr was proud of his daughter and realized more keenly than he had in some time how very much he missed her when they were separated for long periods of time. He strove to recall the details of the enchanting painting of her which had been executed by his protégé, Saint-Memin. It was a miniature and enchanting in every detail. Saint-Memin was an exceptional artist and had become the darling of New York society since painting Theodosia. As he grew ever closer to the estate, Burr's impatience to see her again increased. How he longed to share his news with her and to learn of his grandson's progress with the course of studies he had outlined for the young lad.

When he arrived at The Oaks Theodosia was resting in her room. In order to conserve her strength, she formed the habit of resting and reading in her room each afternoon. Occasionally, she would fall into a nap but not often. Burr was greeted at the door by one of the family servants who carried the message to his mistress that her father was arrived. Although Theo had received a letter from her father saying that he would be visiting her on his return from the Floridas, she had no way of knowing exactly when that would be, and she had somehow not expected his arrival to be so soon. In her excitement she dropped the book she was reading. She made no effort to retrieve it from the floor where it lay but sped from the room, giving more the impression of an undisciplined schoolgirl than the mistress of the plantation. She paused only for a moment when she first saw him, disheveled and worn from the day's ride. Then she spread wide her arms and ran to him calling, "Papa. Oh, papa, how good it is to see you. How good it is to hold you. How very very

good." The tears began to sting her eyes, so complete was her happiness at being able to embrace her father.

It was the first time she had seen him since the unfortunate incident with Mr. Hamilton, and she had worried a good deal for his welfare and his state of mind. No one in the South considered the affair anything more than an unfortunate end to an honorable contest. It was generally agreed that her father was obviously being unfairly persecuted by his fellow politicians and the authorities in the North. How this might affect his normally ebullient spirits, she could only conjecture. His letters were written in an obvious effort to prevent her worrying about his state of mind. Therefore, she had worried more about him, but now he was here. Not only was he here, but he appeared to be in fine mettle. His embrace of her was the comforting solace of which she was in sore need.

"My dear Theo . . . my dearest child," he murmured against her hair as she clung to him. They stood many minutes wrapped in close embrace, and still she would not release him.

"Theo . . . Theo, my treasure," he said as he disengaged himself enough to examine her lovely face. "Why, Theo, now come, come. I had hoped that you would be happy to see your old scamp of a father, and you greet me with tears. What is this for a welcome, my love? If you cannot give me a better reception than this, I shall mount my horse and ride again to Charleston where I shall spend my time in the company of your father-in-law," he teased in his most caressing tone.

"Oh, papa, do not make sport of me. I rejoice to see you, you know I do. It is only that to hold you gives me such comfort, such pleasure, that I know I shall be all well now. I have tried not to worry, as you instructed of me, but I could not help to have some concern. And you would not have me put on a false face and be other than honest with you, would you, my dearest father?"

"No, never that, my dear, never. I would deal harshly with you if I thought you were not honest with me. You know that I have long considered you my only true treasure, and since the death of your mother, who was most dear to me, you are the sole recipient of my true af-

fections." He was more moved by her display of affection than he thought himself capable of being and kissed her affectionately upon her forehead. "But tell me, does Joseph not offer you comfort and affection any longer? Does he not solace when you are unhappy or in pain?"

"There could be no more thoughtful, more considerate, more loving husband than my Joseph, father. His love sustains me and I cherish him tenderly, but you are my father. I am your flesh, your blood, my intellect is the product of your training. You are my first love, father, and no woman ever forgets her first love, though she has others after," Theo told him earnestly.

Again he drew her close to him and spoke softly as he told her, "No matter what riches I may acquire, no matter what heights I may attain, no matter what crown may adorn my head, you, my adored one, will always be my brightest flawless jewel."

"I delight in pleasing you, father, and I shall henceforth behave worthy of your tender regard." She withdrew from his embrace but continued to hold his hand in hers. "There, you see, I am quite recovered." She daubed at her eyes with a delightfully scented white handkerchief, then smiling her most beguiling smile at him, she asked, "And how do you find me, sir? I pray you be not too harsh in your judgment."

"Never harsh, my dear Theo. But you do not appear overly strong to me. You were never a delicate child, but you have taken on a fragility which gives you a wistful air. I detect slight shadows beneath your eyes, but there remains a faint blush of color on your cheeks and sunlight dances still in your eyes. I must conclude that happiness seems to cause you to glow in a special way. Tell me, my girl, are you happy here in this oppressive, forsaken country?"

"Father, it is not forsaken. Hundreds of people live up and down the river." She laughed in reply, then soberly she added, "Yes, father. I am happy here, so very happy. But surely you knew without asking. It is Joseph and not the South Carolina state that fills me with happiness—and my little treasure, your namesake, your grandson. Together they make me happy, and it is no matter that the

climate is foul and at times oppressive, or that I find life on the plantation somewhat burdensome and the slaves at times difficult for me to manage. Often they are vexatious to spur into completing their work and it seems to take forever before it is finished. They are not like the slaves we had in New York," she said with a sigh. "But the society is gay and very cosmopolitan. Life is so full of activities that I can not possibly accept all the invitations we receive. My life here is easy. There is never a cause for worry about unpaid debts—though I do not say that to chastize you, father. There is always money for everything that I may desire. And Joseph is the best of husbands. He is kind, thoughtful, gentle, and loving. He has given me his whole heart, and the best of his world. In return I have given him only one son—and a sickly wife. It is a poor bargain for him, I fear, and he reaps little reward from it. But for my longing for you, my world would be nothing but contentment and joy."

"You are most fortunate to find contentment and happiness and love in your life, Theo, but I forbid you to consider yourself a poor bargain. I would not trade one hour spent in your company for a dozen beautiful, young, robust, giddy Southern ladies to have with me for a lifetime. Your beauty, your grace, your charm, your quality, in addition to your splendid mind and excellent education, offer more to any man than all the empty-headed prattle about balls and gowns and love affairs that are part and parcel of the makeup of most young women your age. Do not underestimate yourself, my Theo. You are a treasure to me and would be to any man. Joseph is most fortunate to have won your affection." He kissed her gently on the cheek. "And now, if you will permit an old man one desire other than your company, that would be for a bath and a change of clothing. When I reappear, totally transformed into a handsome and charming houseguest, I shall allow you to bring me a glass of Joseph's finest Madeira. Although I still maintain my habit of limiting myself to a minimum of spirits, I have some news to impart to you which shall be cause of a celebration, I think—but not now, my dear. First I must make myself presentable," he

told her. "And I do hope that you will allow me to see my darling Gampy when I am refreshed."

"I have had the bedroom next to his prepared for you, papa. Come, I'll show you which it is, then I shall leave you and order your bath and a most proper meal. Very like, when you have finished with your transformation, the news of your arrival will have reached Joseph and he will be here shortly thereafter to greet you also." She led him hand-in-hand up the broad staircase to the room which she had designated the "Vice-Presidential suite." Seeing him safely and well installed in his room, she hurried down the stairs to the kitchen to instruct the servants of his desire for the tub and water for a bath. Then she set about personally supervising the preparation of a meal for him. Although they were in the custom of having their large meal earlier in the day, she knew that her father had traveled without stopping for food and must, certainly, be famished. She remembered how well it pleased his palate when he was presented with a well-prepared meal, and she was determined that every minute he spent with them should be of the finest she could provide.

As Theodosia anticipated, by the time Aaron finished refreshing himself, Joseph was returned to the house and was awaiting him in the company of Theo and little Gampy. The table in the dining room was laid with steaming plates of vegetables freshly prepared. There was hot, spicy baked ham, mutton chops, brown and slightly crisp on the outside but delicately pink beneath the crust. Theodosia remembered how he doted on them. There were hot corn muffins and a dish of good yellow butter and a mound of homemade grape preserves prepared only that morning. On the sideboard there were two different pies, one made of molasses and nuts and one made from the damson plums which were abundant in the area. There was also a platter of fresh fruit and a sweet cake made of black walnuts. Theo and Gampy were seated at the table, while Joseph stood beside them, sipping a glass of Madeira. As Aaron entered the room, he placed his glass of wine beside Theo and greeted his father-in-law ebulliently. Joseph Alston was proud that his father-in-law was the Vice-President of the United States. It was a

position of enormous prestige. The two men had established a very warm rapport considering they were, in a sense, rivals for the affection of the same woman. But since they realized the situation was one where neither would be able to win her entirely for himself, she served to create a bond between them. Also, Joseph had recently become interested in entering the political life of South Carolina and realized that there was much he could learn from Theo's father. Aaron Burr was such a knowledgeable man and so willing to help him with advice and counsel that Joseph felt a new respect for the man who had achieved the Vice-Presidency—and very nearly had held the Presidency in his grasp.

"I am most happy to receive you into my home, sir. I trust your journey to the Floridas was as pleasant as you anticipated." He handed a glass of mellow and aged Madeira to his father-in-law.

"It was most exhilarating, most enlightening, Joseph. But I shall have more of that to tell you after we have dined. I must say, honestly, that I am happy to be here with you and Theo. I did not realize that I was famished until the odors of the food began to reach into my room, almost as though they were being sent to seek me out." He raised the glass in salutation to his family. "I would like to drink to your good health, my dear," he said, addressing his remark to Theodosia, "and to our future life together," he said to both of them as he raised the glass to his lips.

"To you, father," returned Theo as she stood beside Joseph. The three sipped at their wine as Gampy watched.

"And you, my dear Gampillo," said his grandfather, affectionately rumpling the boy's hair. "Have you mastered your French vocabulary yet?" He lifted his young grandson into his arms. The boy was little more than three years old, but already his grandfather had laid down an arduous schooling plan for him. Aaron had personally supervised Theodosia's education when she was young, and he meant to apply the same strict regimen to the education of his grandson. What he forgot to consider was that Theo was a mother and her heart was in sympathy with

the young child on days when he preferred to run and play in the sunshine. He was so young.

"I am trying, grandfather," he replied earnestly.

"That's good. That's very good, my boy. Then the next time we meet, I shall expect you to be able to converse with me in French."

"Yes, grandfather."

"Oh, papa. You're much too demanding." Theodosia took her son into her own arms and kissed him tenderly about the face. "May he not remain a child just a few years longer? Must he grow to be a man so fast?"

"You will have other babies who can remain children, Theodosia, and you may smother them with your motherly affection, but this young man must learn self-discipline, French and Spanish, and classical languages. He must master law and government, philosophy, and art. He must learn the principles of agriculture and the growing of crops. He must learn business and warfare. He must also learn to be master of himself, his impulses, his desires, and his energies, and all this at an early age, so that he may be the master of other men when he is grown. I promise you, Theodosia, this boy has a magnificent future ahead of him. I intend that he shall be the ruler of a country, a new country. It is his destiny to become an emperor, and he must be the finest the world has known since the beginning of time. He shall have the education of a son of royalty."

"All that for one small boy? Father, you are surely mad." Theodosia laughed. "I would not even wish for him to be the President of these United States—nor do I anticipate that opportunity for him. His future will be that of a plantation owner like his father, not an emperor. That is the heredity here in the South. Perhaps it slipped your mind, for I can not believe that you are unaware of that fact. Emperor indeed! You have a lively imagination, father."

"If you were referring to this rice plantation, sir, as an empire, I quite understand the allusion. With the large number of slaves here on our land, it might be considered, and I intend that our son shall have the proper and suitable education to prepare him to manage the estate

and be responsible for the welfare of his slaves when the time comes. You need have no fear on that score. Even if we are blessed with more children, to him would still fall the responsibility and the privilege of maintaining this rice plantation. For the oldest son, it is not a matter of choice but a matter of trust, of responsibility. But his mother is right. At his tender years, he might be allowed a few more in which to occupy his time with romping and games." Joseph's gaze rested on his wife and son.

Theo held her boy against her breast and he rested his head on her shoulder. The boy resembled his mother and was most affectionate toward her. On days when she was not feeling well, he would climb onto her bed so that she might read to him. He was content to give up his play to remain by her side. On days when her health was good, they often mounted her horse. With little Aaron in front of his mother, they would ride for several miles through the country, always being careful to take Byrn with them. Byrn was a very large and powerful negro slave of above-average intelligence. He had some education and was able to read and write a little and had acquired a healthy respect for education. He rode very well and seemed to enjoy the status of being Mrs. Alston's bodyguard on days when she rode alone or with her son.

When she was a young girl, growing up in New York, Theodosia loved to ride for over an hour each morning, galloping along with carefree abandon across the fields or by the river. When she came to South Carolina as a bride, knowing nothing of the countryside, she continued the habit. Although Joseph had protested, he could deny Theodosia nothing she truly set her mind upon. But one morning as she was cantering along in the sunshine enjoying the pleasant day, her horse came upon a rattlesnake slithering across the road. Theo had never before encountered a rattler and did not realize that they could strike from a great distance by using their coiled bodies as a spring. She thought only to jump over the reptile and continue on her way. But the sight and sound of the thing startled the horse, who reared on its hind legs barely in time to avoid being struck. To think that she could not control her animal terrified Theo and she clung with des-

peration to the reins in her hands. It was well that she did, for the horse reared a second time, refusing to go forward as the snake quickly began to recoil its body. Twisting its body, the horse turned of its own will and galloped back to the house.

Theodosia had been badly shaken by the incident, and when she confided to Joseph what had happened, he refused to allow her to ride alone any longer. He searched for a slave to ride with her and give her protection. At length he found Byrn. Byrn was an excellent horseman and an accurate marksman. He carried two guns with him whenever they rode out, but he always returned the guns to the library of The Oaks when they were safely home again. Joseph never had any difficulty with the workers on his plantation, and he did not mean to encourage any by allowing one of the slaves, no matter how trusted, to possess weapons.

"You may tell your grandson good night now, papa. It is past his bedtime and tomorrow you may teach him French if you insist, but not tonight, please," Theo jokingly informed her father. She passed the sleepy little boy into the waiting arms of a dusky-skinned young woman named Sullah, who carried Gampy upstairs to his room and tucked him into bed.

Theodosia and Joseph listened with awe and fascination to the plan that Aaron unraveled over the meal. He had hoped to wait until they had digested their food and were relaxing as the men enjoyed their "ceegars" and conversation, but he could contain his plan no longer. He explained that the idea had not come to him all at once—it was not a divine revelation. He laid no claim to that. It was something which he had been endeavoring to perfect for some time, but he did not wish to reveal it, even to his daughter, until the details of the plan were clear in his own mind. Now that he had traveled to the Floridas and seen the land and its inhabitants, it was beginning to take shape with admirable rapidity.

When the Louisiana Purchase had become part of the United States, Aaron Burr dared to suggest to President Jefferson that he would be willing to serve as governor of the newly acquired territory. In fact, with his command of

French and Spanish, it seemed likely that he would be the best suited candidate for that position. But President Jefferson did not trust his Vice-President. In fact, he had not trusted him since the election of 1800, when he came very close to losing the election to Burr. It was well known to everyone involved that Burr was intended to enter as a Vice-Presidential candidate, but when the time came for the electors to cast their ballots, someone had persuaded enough of them to cast their votes for Burr so that the election resulted in a tie vote. This was a great blow to Jefferson's pride, for he had expected no such difficulty. The man with the greatest number of votes would be President and the one with the lesser count would automatically become Vice-President. Obviously, through some trickery he was in danger of being voted the Vice-President. The vote remained a tie for more than thirty ballots while Jefferson's hostility, resentment, and distrust of his opponent grew. It was only due to the influence of Hamilton that the tie was finally broken. When the decision was reached and Jefferson won the Presidency by one vote only, Burr was able to shrug off the defeat—although he never forgave Hamilton—but Jefferson never got over his dislike for the man who had caused his disgrace. Jefferson was not willing to trust a man to take charge of the new territory of Louisiana, and administer its destiny from the faraway city of New Orleans, when he felt that man was not to be trusted under his very nose. Only Burr was surprised by the refusal to give him the governorship. Jefferson never seriously considered it.

But the United States was only one country, and if it did not respect the services Burr had to offer, some other country most certainly would. Already he had made overtures to England, France, and Spain, offering his services in establishing a colony on their behalf if they would finance his expedition. And, in time, he informed his daughter and her husband, this colony would become his empire. When war with Spain came, as it most surely would, he would march his men into Mexico and annex that land, or a part thereof, to his own. This was the legacy he would be able to pass on to his grandson. And this

was the reason that little "Gamp" must be trained to be a ruler of men.

"But surely, sir, you, the Vice-President of this country, would not attempt to wrest from it the newly acquired Louisiana lands," his son-in-law protested.

"I did not say that, Joseph. The land that would be mine would not be in the boundaries of the United States. It would be to the west beyond those boundaries and then to the South of it and into Mexico. I tell you, Joseph, I now believe those people to be so oppressed and in such poverty, that it would be a blessing for them if we should capture their land. They would welcome us with open arms. Very little bloodshed would be required. And the empire I dream of would be one of beauty, culture, and art. It would surpass even the Greek civilization in its finest hour." Burr spoke with such conviction and sincerity that both Theodosia and Joseph were caught in the hypnotic spell he wove. They could envision a magnificent culture, impressive in its aspirations, with Aaron Burr as its ruler, a beneficent monarch seeing to the welfare of all his people, like Solomon of old, dispensing fair and sound judgments and dispersing the wealth among all the people, with an elite core of talented artists and gifted statesmen surrounding him.

The dream was compelling, captivating, and, Aaron convinced them, very close to becoming a reality. But until he was ready to take the final step, they must swear themselves to secrecy, divulging to no one even so much as a word of what he had revealed to them. This they readily promised to do. He intended to wait until war with Spain had been declared, and he was convinced that it would be soon. Then, at the head of a troop of soldiers, he would begin his grand campaign. He would send word to them when the time was right for them to be ready. They could wait. As long as they had each other to share their thoughts and plans, Theodosia and Joseph had no need to divulge the plan to another soul. Burr carefully explained the code he would use when writing to them. He cautioned them that there must be no written evidence of the key to decipher it. They must remember what he told them.

Aaron Burr slumbered peacefully that night. He now had begun the steps to establish his dynasty. Had either Theo or Joseph recoiled in horror at the revelation of his plan, he might have hesitated to pursue it. But they both heartily endorsed the project, encouraging him, giving him even more impetus to carry it through to fulfillment.

Only Damon Aarons did not share his enthusiasm. The plan, to him, seemed so preposterous, so absurd, so dangerously treacherous, that he was terrified of the outcome. Although he was not a student of history and could not remember what had been the final result of Aaron Burr's plan for an empire, he was well aware that in the twentieth century no such country remained in existence. Perhaps Burr had become emperor of some piece of Mexico and, like Maximilian who had at one time been Emperor of Mexico, had been killed by a political enemy. The prospect was disheartening and even more so since he seemed to be powerless to thwart it. He was less and less able to control Burr's mind and certainly helpless to alter his thinking. This great plan must have been the reason Burr refused to allow him to return to the twentieth century in the company of Angie Browning. Burr's determination was growing. Aarons's was diminishing. It was a dangerous combination, making Aarons's position tenuous at best. He needed some external aid, some assistance, the sort of urgency which the attempt to rescue Angie Browning had created. Now he had only himself, and that wasn't enough.

He tried to convince himself that he still had a chance to break away from Aaron Burr, to return to his own life; but it was becoming increasingly difficult to believe that it ever would be accomplished. He now was faced with the hideous prospect, and it was a distinct possibility, that he would live and die as Aaron Burr. If that was to be his fate, he still could not bring himself to regret what he had done. It was not the lot of every man who had the opportunity to render service to a fellow creature. If he accomplished nothing else in his lifetime, he had saved the life and sanity of Angie Browning. He wondered what had become of her. He supposed that she returned home to

Iowa and was happily settled again into domestic life with her husband, David.

Aarons could not think of Angie Browning without thinking of her sister, Percy . . . Percy with her remarkable sensitivity, all the more remarkable because it was so well developed without being trained. It was a natural thing, an inborn gift. He wondered what had become of Percy. Had she made any attempt to contact him as he had tried to reach her? If she had, he was unaware of the effort. Possibly, and most likely, she had made some attempt, but failing to establish any form of communication, had now become resigned to her failure and gone back to her life as it was. After all, her ESP experiences had centered only around her sister. Except for a certain feeling of kindred spirits between them, he had no reason to believe that she would be able to reach him in this life in another time.

Feeling the hollowness of defeat, the mind of Damon Aarons resigned itself momentarily to its fate and the mind of Aaron Burr took prominence. Even as it retreated into this state of submission, Damon Aarons could not erase from his mind the thoughts of Percy Brooks. He wondered why this should be. As he slept in the person of Aaron Burr, he dreamed that she called to him across the emerald green of the rice fields. As he looked in the direction of the voice, she lifted an arm to wave to him. He could not make out the features, but he could tell that it was a lovely young woman dressed in white. As she waved, she called again. "Aaron, Aaron," she called, and the voice was unmistakably that of Percy. He began to run toward her across the green fields. At the same time she started to run to meet him. Again, she called "Aaron" with a happy lilt to her voice. From the sound of the name, Damon Aarons was uncertain whether she was calling for him or for Aaron Burr. As they ran to greet each other, the spongy rice fields were transformed into a beautiful garden like the ones in Charleston with soft green grass underfoot and brilliant flowers all around. As he drew closer to her, he stopped abruptly. Now he could see her features clearly. It was not Percy Brooks at all. It was Theodosia Burr, Aaron's beautiful daughter. Slowly,

she began to retreat until she faded into the distance and all vestiges of the dream disappeared. Aaron Burr tossed restlessly for a few minutes, then again he returned to peaceful slumber.

CHAPTER VIII

Officer Gravely sat at his desk sorting through the water-soaked contents of a woman's purse. It was a distasteful job, and he was disgruntled that he had been assigned the chore. Someone had to do it, but why him? Two towels were spread across the desk to absorb the messy residue. He had another towel to dry the articles as he removed them and a fourth one on which to wipe his hands. He was looking for identification of almost any sort, but in the meantime, he also had to write a description of everything in the purse. The river was muddy, and the brown water had thoroughly saturated everything in the bag, staining it a dreadful coffee-brown color. There was an envelope that held what would probably turn out to be a ticket. It was so completely limp with water that merely removing it from a pocket of the handbag caused it to tear. It would have to be dried before they could gain any information from that. There was a compact containing a mass of muddy powder, a container of coral-pink lipstick, a small hairbrush, a disreputable handkerchief, which had once been white with green leaves embroidered on the edge, and in a separate zippered compartment there was a wallet. Fortunately, the wallet was a fine grade of leather and had been able to stand up to the overnight exposure in the water. But the sodden bills it contained had not. They clung to each other, refusing to be separated or counted. Officer Gravely put them aside. The money wasn't important. That would reveal nothing to them. He had found what he was searching for. Inserted into a plastic flap was identification, a driver's license. It, too, had been stained an ugly

brown by the river water and, thanks to the plastic protection, it was still legible. It gave the name and address of the woman who had been injured in the car accident the day before. Officer Gravely studied it carefully. Then he remembered something.

"Webb," he called to another police officer across the room. "What's the name of that woman who's missing—the guy who came in last night?"

Sergeant Webb Norris drew a note pad to him, opened it, and thumbed through the first few pages. His eye fell on the last entry. "Her name is Mrs. Gordon Brooks, Percy Brooks. Percy—that's a funny name for a woman, isn't it? I woulda' thought it was a man." He looked across the room at Officer Gravely. "You find something?" he asked.

"Yeah. That's the woman who was in the car wreck, the one that fell in the river. Gee, ain't that something? What do you suppose *she* was doing over by Plantersville? There's nothing worth seeing over there," he said.

Sergeant Norris shrugged his shoulders. Who could tell?

"Guess we better let him know," Norris responded.

"How do we get in touch with this Mr. Brooks?" Gravely wanted to know.

"Uhhhhh." Norris checked his notebook again. "He's staying at the Golden Eagle Motor Inn. Phone number over there is 722-8411. He's in room 111 . . . You want to call him?"

Gravely shook his head. "Nah, you can do it."

Norris picked up the phone and dialed the number. They both waited for the phone to be picked up on the other end. Norris asked for room 111 and waited again. There was no answer. He shook his head at Gravely. "No answer," he said.

"Where do you suppose he can be?" Gravely wondered.

"He'll show up. I'll try him again after a little while," Norris said.

"Poor guy. I sure hate to be the one to tell him. You wouldn't like to do it for me, would you?" Gravely asked.

"Not me. It's your assignment, officer," Norris replied.

"By the way, did anyone find out how she's doing today? I mean, you know, is she still alive? 'Cause if she's not, it'd be a terrible thing to have the guy rush over to the hospital just to learn that she was dead."

"I called the hospital this morning, and they said there wasn't any change. She's just the same, still hanging on, and they're giving her a lot of tests to see what's wrong. Funny, she hasn't come around at all—I mean still unconscious. It's been almost twenty-four hours since the thing happened, hasn't it? Something like that's such a shame."

He placed the driver's license beside the collection of other items on the towels and made a list of all of them. When this was completed, he decided he might as well call the hospital to inform them of the name of their patient, who was listed as "identity unknown."

It was about three hours later that a very worried and sheepish-looking Gordon Brooks entered the police station. He had been walking the streets of Charleston in the hope of coming across his wife. Sometime during the early-morning hours the thought of amnesia had buried itself in his mind. By the time he finished breakfast, it seemed the only reasonable answer. Now that he had time to consider it, he decided that something had happened to cause Percy to forget who and where she was. That would explain why she hadn't met him, why she hadn't left a note, why she was nowhere to be found. He happily discarded the notion of her going back in time to Damon Arons. That had been merely an absurd emotional idea. This was a much more satisfactory explanation, and he was going to cling to it until it was proved wrong. So far, he'd had no luck in tracing his wife and decided to see if the police were making any progress.

Stepping into the police station, he encountered Officer Curtiss, sitting at the front desk.

"Uh, hello, officer. I was in here yesterday, or really last night. And I reported to the policeman on duty that my wife was missing. She was supposed to pick me up at the airport, but she never arrived. I wondered if you might have found out anything about her yet," he explained.

"What did you say your name was?" Officer Curtiss asked him.

"I'm Gordon Brooks. My wife's name is Percy—Percy Brooks. We're visiting here. She came on ahead a week ago and was supposed to meet me at the airport last night. But no one seems to have seen her since yesterday morning."

The name Brooks carried across the room to Officer Gravely. He had not been on duty the night before when Gordon reported to the police and had no idea what Mr. Brooks looked like; consequently, he didn't pay attention to him as he entered the station. It was only the name that caught his attention. He looked up from his work. Studying Gordon, he rose and slowly walked to the desk of Officer Curtiss.

"Mr. Brooks, I'm Officer Gravely," he said. "I've been assigned to your wife's case. Would you come over to my desk for a few minutes?" He indicated his desk across the room, still covered with the contents of Percy's handbag.

"Have you been able to find out where she is, officer?" Gordon asked, his hopes rising for the first time since his arrival.

"I think we may have. But I'd like your help. I want you to take a look at some of these things for me if you will. Do you recognize any of these things on my desk?"

"That's Percy's handbag. What a mess! What happened? How did it get like that?" He reached for it but withdrew his hand before actually picking it up. "Is it all right if I touch these things, or should I leave them alone?"

"You can touch them. It's only when we need fingerprints that the evidence can't be touched. These are just for identification, not for fingerprints. Your wife hasn't done anything wrong—if it is your wife, that is. You're sure that it is your wife's purse?"

"I'm positive. I've seen it dozens of times. I couldn't be mistaken . . . And that's her handkerchief. Our little girl gave it to her mother for Christmas last year." He was gently fingering the items spread before him on the desk. He paused as he reached the wallet. "Yes," he said, "this belongs to Percy. Where did you find it? It looks like it's

been in some river. Where's my wife? Did you find her or just her purse?" The horrible thought that she might have been attacked and the attacker had thrown her purse into a river or lake occurred to him. The fact that Percy herself had been in the river did not. "Where's my wife?" he repeated.

"Well, yes, we think we've found your wife, Mr. Brooks . . . We just located her things today, so we had to be sure of the identification before we told you." Officer Gravely wanted to make it as easy and gentle as he could. He hoped to break the news to Gordon by slow degrees, but as the explanation came out, it was what he was not saying that frightened Gordon.

"Are you trying to tell me she's dead?" Why else would he be talking around the subject, not telling Gordon she's here or she's there. My God, could Percy be dead? How? How could it have happened? "Is she dead?" he insisted again, not giving the officer an opportunity to deny it.

"No, no. She's not dead. It's not that, Mr. Brooks."

Gordon relaxed a bit. He could take anything else now.

"Well, the truth is, Mr. Gordon, she's in the hospital. She was in an automobile accident, drove her car off a bridge, and it landed in the river—close to the shore, so she didn't drown, you see."

"But she's a good driver. In fact, she's an excellent driver. Why would she drive off a bridge? That's crazy," Gordon objected.

"It was an accident, Mr. Brooks. We haven't had a chance to question your wife about it yet, but there was a young boy, Roger Kempley his name is. He's about eleven or twelve, family lives in Plantersville. He told us what happened. He was crossing the bridge on his bicycle at the same time your wife was. The bike hit something and he fell in front of the car. I guess she swerved to keep from hitting him. The car went through the railing and down into the river. The kid ran back to get his parents, and they brought a doctor friend of theirs with them. The father and the doctor were able to pull your wife out of the car and bring her to the hospital here in Charleston. It was the closest one. But she didn't have any identification on her at the time so we couldn't tell who she was until

they dragged the car out of the river today. Her purse was on the floor in the front. So I guess if this is her purse, the lady must be your wife all right," Officer Gravely explained.

"Couldn't she tell you her name? Didn't she ask for me?" Gordon wanted to know.

Officer Gravely shook his head to both questions.

"Well, why not?" questioned Gordon. "What's wrong with her?"

Officer Gravely took a minute to consider his reply, but Gordon couldn't wait. "She's badly hurt, isn't she? That's it, isn't it?"

"She hasn't talked since the accident happened, so we didn't have any way of knowing anything about her. The doctors don't seem to know how badly she's been hurt, so I can't tell you. I called the hospital this morning, and they said she's still alive. She's getting good care, Mr. Brooks."

"She's still alive? Oh, my God. Then it is bad," he said.

Officer Gravely didn't make any comment.

"What hospital is she in? I've got to get to her," Gordon exclaimed.

"I'll drive you over. Just give me a minute to tell Officer Curtiss where I'll be." He turned to the front desk, took a few steps in that direction and informed Curtiss that Mr. Brooks had made a positive identification of the contents of the purse. It was definitely the man's wife who was in the accident. He was going to drive Mr. Brooks to the hospital, and he'd be back sometime later. Curtiss nodded that he understood and looked at Gordon. Poor guy, he thought, what can you do? Such things happen. He was just glad it hadn't been his wife. The word around the station was that she had been so badly banged up she probably wouldn't make it. At least that's what Cranshaw said. He helped get her to the hospital and he was the only one who had seen her. So they had only his word for it, but he wasn't easily shaken up by these things, so he was probably right. He wondered if Gravely had mentioned that to the husband.

Gravely led the way to the police car he used. He climbed into the driver's seat as Gordon climbed into the

front beside him. Putting his hand on the ignition, he paused uncertainly, then turned and faced Gordon.

"I wasn't gonna mention it, Mr. Gordon, but I guess you ought to have some warning. One of the reasons your wife hasn't talked is that she got banged up pretty bad on the head. She lost a lot of blood by the time they got her to the hospital, but they've given her a lot of plasma to replace it. Only they had to shave her head before they could operate on her, you know. The doctor had to bandage her whole head because it was a pretty big cut. That's all I know. The operation lasted quite awhile, but I haven't been able to find out whether or not they had to do any repairs on her brain. The nurse said this morning that it's probably still the shock that she hasn't recovered from. I can't tell you what else is wrong—oh, yeah, she has a busted ankle. They put that in a cast. And she's been put in intensive care so they can keep a close watch on her." He paused for a moment to let the importance of his words sink in. Gordon did not respond. He just sat staring into space. It was so hard to believe. Surely the officer wasn't talking about his wife, his Percy. It didn't seem real.

Officer Gravely wondered if he had understood what he'd been told. "I just thought you ought to know before you saw her, Mr. Brooks, so it wouldn't be such a shock, you know."

"Yes, thank you, officer. I understand—and, uh, thanks for warning me. I'm sure it's not an easy thing to tell a man about his wife."

Neither of them spoke again on the way to the hospital. There was nothing more to be said.

Gordon braced himself for the sight of Percy. The nurse explained the rules of the IC unit. He would be permitted to spend only fifteen minutes each hour with his wife. Gordon objected, but it was useless. The rule applied to all patients in the intensive-care unit and there were never any exceptions. The nurse told him that he was welcome to use the waiting room outside the IC unit and she suggested that he might also like to use the cafeteria, giving him directions on how to find it. Then he was

expected that he would be relieved when she showed some sign of recovery, but instead he was disturbed by this development—and he couldn't unravel the reason for his concern.

CHAPTER IX

Aaron Burr's visit with his daughter and family passed quickly and agreeably. Theodosia wanted to give a ball in his honor, or at least a dinner so that she might display her illustrious father to her many friends in the area. Her beauty and charm had made her a favorite of society. Even though she was forced by her illness to be somewhat retiring at times, she remained extremely popular. It took considerable persuasion on his part for Aaron to dissuade her. He had been so thoroughly feted during his stay on the island of St. Simons and again on his arrival in Savannah that he would much prefer to spend his time in her company and playing with his grandson. Theo was a bit disappointed; nonetheless, it pleased her to know that he would rather spend his time with her alone. There would be other visits when she could put him on display—many others.

They rode together, with little Aaron perched in front of his proud grandfather, who gave him instructions on how to hold the reins, how to give commands to a horse, how to mount, how to gallop. Theo enjoyed watching the two of them together. They dined together under the magnificent oak trees which provided shelter from the sun; they walked and they talked together and were happy and content in each other's company. Often their conversation turned to the plans for the empire, their shared secret. Joseph pledged a large sum of money to the realization of this dream and promised to seek financing from some of his neighbors and friends when the time came. Burr drew pleasure from the days spent in the company of his daughter—and her family.

On his last day with them, Theodosia insisted upon inviting some members of Joseph's family—only a few—to join them in the evening for an elaborate "tea." The sun was just beginning to set as the carriages rolled down the avenue of stately oaks toward the house brilliantly ablaze with white candles. One by one the Alstons—both those who spelled their name with one "l" and those who used the double-"l" spelling, the Allstons—arrived in their array of finery. The gowns of the women rivaled anything he had seen in New York or Washington. Many of them had come from France or England. This was a very wealthy, and thoroughly cosmopolitan, society. It was not uncommon for the wealthy landowners to travel to Europe, and their dress and manner reflected the influence of the European society. Looking about him, Burr was certain that if his project were presented properly, they would need go no further than Joseph's own family to finance the entire expedition.

Theodosia dressed very carefully for the evening, choosing a new gown of softest white muslin, since her father liked her best in white. It was fashioned with a daringly low neckline and short puffy sleeves. The skirt was softly draped from a high waist and fell to her ankles, revealing a pair of white satin shoes with slightly squarish toes. About her waist was tied a sash of lustrous satin with streamers which fell to the hemline of her dress. She wore no jewelry, feeling the unbroken smoothness of her neck suited the dress far better. For quite no reason at all, by the time she finished dressing, she was overcome by a wave of weakness and fatigue. It was so severe that she almost regretted there was an evening of social amenities yet to survive before she could retire. It would have been so pleasant to stretch out on her bed and have her father sit by her side to talk with her or to read to her. But that could not be. She mustered all her strength and descended the stairs to greet her guests with a smile. As she did so, the weakness was attended by a feeling of indescribable giddiness. She felt very lighthearted and gay, happy to be where she was and to be who she was. At the foot of the stairs, her father stood in conversation with Colonel Alston. At the sound of her footsteps, they turned to her.

The sight of her father standing, waiting for her, caused her face to be lighted into a sweet, contented, irrepressible smile, her dark eyes twinkling with delight and pride. For a brief moment, there was a disturbed frown on Burr's face. He recognized her and yet he didn't. She was Theodosia and yet she wasn't. She held out a small hand to him and murmured softly, "Father."

Aaron Burr took the proffered hand, and in his most gallant fashion raised it to his lips to kiss. "My dear, my Theo, you have never appeared so lovely. There is a special radiance about you," he said. "White still flatters you most wickedly." Then he pulled a white rose from the bouquet on the table next to him. Graciously he offered it to her. Her slender fingers curled about the stem, and she dipped her head slightly to inhale the pungent, sweet scent of the flower. Raising her head, she smiled her thanks and again said, "Father." She embraced him affectionately, and as she did so, Burr stiffened. Was this surge of excitement he felt prompted merely by the lovely sight of his daughter or was there something more, something beyond that? His hands on her arms tightened as though to hold her in case she attempted to escape. His dark eyes ceased their happy twinkling, and in their depths could be seen a struggle—had anyone taken the time or trouble to look carefully—then a curtain seemed to veil them, hiding the man's inner thoughts and allowing only the facade which he wished to show to the world to be reflected in his eyes. Slowly he held his daughter away from him. Searching her face carefully, he said in a voice so low that only she could hear, "Theo, my dear," and then "Percy? Can it be Percy?"

Damon Aarons had been shaken to his very soul by the recognition of the young woman he had known in the twentieth century, in his own life. It did not seem possible, and yet he had thought of her so often, conjured up her image so many times that he could not now be mistaken. It must be that she and Theodosia were one and the same, but why had he failed to recognize her when he first arrived at The Oaks? Would she, like Angie, be unaware of her other identity? Would he be able to communicate with her? Had he sunk so far into despair that he was uncon-

scious of her presence the entire time Aaron Burr and Theodosia were enjoying their gladsome reunion? But why, if she was Percy, did she fail to recognize him, But, of course, he realized that was a foolish thing to wonder if Percy had not carried her own consciousness back through time with her. Or had Theo and Percy become one only just now? They must find the time to be alone, there was much to say to each other. And at last, here was something for him to grasp, something for him to hold on to. With her help, he would now be able to leave this prison of the body of Aaron Burr. His incredulity turned to relief and then to delight as he continued to embrace her fervently.

"Percy, Percy, however did you manage it? What a marvelous stroke of good fortune that you found me here."

"Oh, Damon, it's you. It's really you. I'm so happy, I think I may cry." Percy clung to him ferociously.

"No, dear Percy, no. You must not cry in front of all these people," he told her.

Looking around, she was aware of the guests for the first time. She felt as though she were in a dream, or more likely, taking part in a staged reenactment of another time, like the candlelight tours she and Angie had taken in old Charleston. Turning to Damon, she whispered, "I don't understand. Where are we? Who are these people? It frightens me a little. Can't you take us back to our own time now?"

Damon was relieved to find that she retained the mind of Percy as he retained the mind of his twentieth-century personality. It would be easier for them to deal with the situation if they worked together. They would be able to help each other. He understood her confusion, though. He had become accustomed to his situation in the past year, but it was new to her and difficult to comprehend. This was not the time to explain what was happening to her. He must try to maintain control of Burr's mind and stand by Percy as best he could to help her over whatever might occur during the evening. Later, when they could be alone, he would do his best to make sense of their circumstances.

"After your guests have gone home, we can talk without being interrupted. For the present, just try to relax as best you can. Don't strain, don't question. Just allow your mind to do as it will. It will be easier for you to adjust," he advised her.

Joseph approached them, and for a moment Percy's face remained a puzzled blank as she looked up at him. But when he took her hand to lead her across the hall to greet some newly arrived Alstons, Theodosia smiled adoringly at her husband and glided gracefully beside him, a most gracious and beautiful hostess. Aaron Burr was surrounded by cousins of Joseph, both on the Alston and Allston sides of the family, all eager to shake the hand of the country's Vice-President.

Much later, after the guests had departed, after Joseph had fallen asleep, while Theodosia was still tossing and turning in bed, Percy Brooks decided it was time to seek out Damon Aarons. Carefully and quietly she tiptoed down the broad stairs in her bare feet. She did not remember to bring a candle, so unused to them was she. It made her all the more pleased to see the moon shining a bright white light through the large windows on the stair landing. At the foot of the stairs, she paused for a moment, uncertain which way to turn, unfamiliar with this great house. She decided the most reasonable place to begin her search would be the front parlor. Almost ghostlike, she inched her way across the hall and peered into the front room. She caught her breath at the sight of Damon sitting quietly in a chair in the corner of the room, waiting for her. She had expected to find him, but still the sight of him sitting so tranquilly, startled her.

"Shhhh," he cautioned her, holding one finger to his lips. He motioned her to enter. Very slowly she moved across the room to him. He stood as she drew near. Extending both arms to her, he took her two hands in his and said encouragingly, "Don't be frightened, Percy. Most important of all, you must try to remain calm, unexcited and reasonable. It's easier that way. Try not to be alarmed by anything you see or hear. You behaved very well tonight. I was quite proud of you. It will become simpler as you grow accustomed to it. And remember, it

is easier if you resist the temptation to struggle or fight against the will of the other person." He stopped abruptly seeing that he was causing her more confusion than comfort.

"Here," he said, leading her to a sofa where they could sit together and he could explain exactly what had happened, although he couldn't imagine how it had happened, and he doubted if she would be able to tell him much.

He continued to hold her hands in his for comfort and reassurance. He tried to choose his words with extreme care so as not to alarm her in his efforts to explain that as Percy Brooks she was now sharing the body of Theodosia Burr, just as he, as Damon Arons, was sharing the body of Aaron Burr. Only one mind was in prominence at any one time. They would have to make an effort to be in control at the same time as the other so they would be able to communicate and to plan how to attempt their escape, for such it was.

"You must remember that to struggle against the will of Theodosia Burr will cause you great distress and perhaps even pain. When I have attempted to act in contradiction to Burr's wishes, I've experienced headaches of such intensity that I thought I might be blinded. I would not wish that suffering on you. When she has taken control of your body, you must allow your will to rest, remain suspended, almost as though you were an audience watching a play which did not involve you." He paused and studied her anxious face. "Do you understand any of what I'm telling you, Percy?"

"I think I do. I can follow the logical sequence of it, but it doesn't seem possible that it could be happening to me—to us," she responded.

"Yes, I know. It will take some time for you to get used to it. Can you tell me how you were able to come to me?" he asked.

"No, I have no recollection of what made it possible. I had tried, truly I had tried, for a long time, but what caused it to happen at long last, I have no idea," she told him.

He nodded his head and thought for a minute. When

he followed Angie Browning back in time, he had done so deliberately, and he had come back in the being of Aaron Burr. Aaron Burr had taken his body to relive this period of his life over again. Damon now realized that he hoped to bring about the realization of his grand scheme. Now that he was in the process of reliving that part of his life, Theodosia was naturally included and had no need of Percy's body. In that event, it was possible that Percy's mind was making use of Theodosia's body, leaving her own body behind. The ramifications of this possibility were disturbing. What was happening to Percy's body while her mind was here? Would they think she was dead? Had she fallen into a deep slumber? Was she alone—or being cared for? Or was it possible that part of her mind had remained behind? None of these options offered much comfort to Damon.

"Percy, can you tell me anything about how you came? Does anyone know you're here?" he asked.

"No, I don't think anyone knows about it. Why?" she wondered.

"Do you know if you planned to come back? Was it deliberate?" he questioned her.

"No, I don't think so. I had tried so hard for such a long time, and then it just happened. It was quite accidental . . . accidental . . ." She stopped stumbling over the word for a moment. "I gave up expecting that it would happen." She spoke again, haltingly, searching her thoughts for some clue she might supply him, but there didn't seem to be any.

"That's no matter. We must find a way to go back. It would be much easier if there were someone in the twentieth century who was helping us, but no matter. You're not to worry about that," he told her, wondering why she had faltered at the word "accidental." Did it have some special meaning for her? He must consider that.

"When you first came here, before Angie returned . . ." she began.

"She did return then? She's perfectly all right, is she?" he interrupted her in his excitement. "How wonderful to learn that we succeeded."

"Oh yes, she's fine. I supposed you knew. She returned

without having any recollection of where she had been or for how long. In fact, she wasn't even aware of being gone," Percy told him.

"In my excitement of realizing it was you, I had forgotten about Angie. I'm so delighted that she's safely returned—both for her and for us. It proves that it can be done," he said. "Now we must concentrate on the two of us."

"I was about to tell you that we met Elena Blakely shortly after you disappeared. Claire explained to her what happened, since she made it impossible to deceive about your whereabouts. She threatened to do all kinds of things if Claire didn't tell her . . . I mean like going to the police. We all decided it would be best just to tell her."

"Yes, I guess Elena would do that. Well, it may be all to our good. She could be helpful. Now, about our return. It will take me a bit of time to plan how best to go about it. It must be done carefully. I would like to allow you time enough to overcome the mind of Theodosia, to become sure enough of yourself to take possession whenever you choose. Right now, Burr's mind is remarkably keen, his will amazingly strong. He intends to allow nothing to thwart his opportunity this time. I'm powerless to transfer both of us back to our own lives. I can control the mind for periods of time like this, but when my will runs contrary to his desires, he seizes the mind with such ferocity that I can offer no resistance," he explained patiently, hoping that she would understand why it was not possible for him to achieve their return immediately. "We must wait until the right moment. I shall need your help and you will need mine. Tomorrow Burr plans to depart for Washington to resume his duties as president of the Senate. You must come to me in Washington as soon as you're able."

The thought of losing Damon Aarons so soon after finding him alarmed Percy.

"Please don't leave me just now. I wouldn't know what to do. Damon, please stay only for a day or two to help me."

"Burr wouldn't consider it, Percy. He means to leave in the morning. But don't be distressed. You only have to al-

low Theodosia to have her way. You may withdraw and take the time to learn about her, learn how to deal with the life you now share, and learn how to bit-by-bit master control of her mind. Don't do anything desperate without me. I'll devise a way to have you come to me as quickly as I can, then we can attempt to depart and expect to succeed. Now we would only fail. It would be useless."

"I'm frightened, Damon."

"I know you are, Percy. It's a frightening experience for you, but you must trust me."

"I do."

"Perhaps I can somehow reach Elena and bring her into this. She has a very good sensitive power, you know."

"I know very little about her. We never established a very friendly relationship. I think she resented me."

"I can see that she would. Still, if she can be helpful, we must include her."

"Couldn't I go with you to Washington?"

"Joseph would never allow Theodosia to leave unless it was for something extremely urgent. Since Theodosia is not too well at present, I don't imagine he will. You must be aware that she's ill."

"Yes, I guess that's so. I really thought it was I." She turned a serious expression to him to ask, "Damon, is it possible that I'm ill also? Is that why I was able to reach you?"

"What?" Damon's eyes searched her face. Was it possible that she was ill? Had that been part of the requirement for making the trip back to him? "What did you say? Percy, can you really be ill?"

"I believe I am, Damon. The part of me that I left—my body—is terribly ill, I think." Her voice slowed and her speech faltered as she added, "I seem—to be—close to—death."

Damon shook her vigorously. "Percy! Percy, are you sure?"

"I don't know, Damon. I don't remember. It just seems that it must be so. I seem to feel it within me somewhere," she replied.

"Oh, God, Percy." He embraced her in desperation. "We won't let that happen, I promise you, Percy. I can't

say how, but I'll find a way to bring you to me quickly. Then we will leave without delay. Trust me. Trust me," he pleaded.

She nodded slightly, her eyes echoing her trust in him. "Now, you must be off to bed . . . and remember, you're not to worry. I'll do that for you," he told her.

Together, hand in hand they climbed the stairs. As they reached her bedroom, Damon kissed her cheek and repeated, "Don't worry."

CHAPTER X

Theodosia had grown accustomed to the mild winters of South Carolina, of pleasant, balmy days. Somehow it seemed a bit wicked to have the flowers blooming at Christmas time. In New York, in younger, more carefree days, there were great piles of snow long before the first of December, and there would be ice on the lakes and ponds where she and her friends had merry skating parties. The snow meant sleigh rides with friends from her past; she remembered how they would wrap themselves warmly with blankets of fur over blankets of coarsely spun wool. Sometimes there would be a large group to go gliding over the frozen snow paths and sometimes there would be only enough to fill one sleigh. She remembered that the snow brought gay and happy times. Here in South Carolina, two weeks before Christmas, there was not so much as one snowflake.

Theodosia could not keep her thoughts from running to her father and the memories of life at Richmond Hill. Her father had written in one of his many letters to her that Richmond Hill had been sold to satisfy his creditors, the whole of the property with all his remaining possessions, the entire contents of the house and stables going to satisfy as many as possible. But the final tally of the auction was disappointingly small, and he had been declared bankrupt by New York. There could be no thought of her father ever returning to New York City now. Though he had established a very successful law practice when he resided there, were he to return now he would be faced not only with the prospect of his arrest on the charge of murder but he would find himself confined to debtor's

prison as well. She must put aside all thoughts of Richmond Hill, she knew; but it was hard. How she longed for her father. It was strange for her to feel so, but in the past few months, Theodosia yearned for her father more than she could remember since she had married. This desire to be with him caused feelings of guilt. She should be most concerned for the welfare of Joseph and their son, and she was—oh she was, truly. But at the moment her father consumed her thoughts.

Theodosia took from her cupboard a light cape of brown wool. Fastening it about her throat, she swept down the stairs and out into the fresh, mild air. She had need of a walk in the open. The confinement of the house suddenly stifled her. She had no idea where she would go or why, but she needed to be in the open world for a while to compose herself. As she ambled slowly and aimlessly down the path, she could not help compare her surroundings with the gardens of Richmond Hill, which in spite of all she could do, would ever remain dear to her. The camellias were in full bloom, those beautiful rose-shaped flowers of white and pink with their leaves of glossy green. The odor of them hung heavily in the air. How it made her yearn for the scent of the evergreens and the sight of the spiky green leaves of holly, accented with bright red berries. Those were the proper adornments for Christmas time. She had hoped to shake from her the nostalgic remembrances of her carefree holidays by the walk in the fresh out-of-doors, but instead, everything kept forcing her to compare her life and the present Christmas time with the happy, festive days spent with her father. She found that the walk only increased her passionate longing to be with him. Perhaps it was merely that they would not be going to Charleston for the gay Christmas season this year. She had not been well all winter and Joseph insisted it would tax her strength overmuch. Together they discussed the trip and agreed it would be best for them to spend the holiday time at The Oaks with little Aaron. It seemed such a sensible idea when they talked of it, but now Theo found she missed the distraction of the busy social life.

Try as she might to overcome her melancholy, the dis-

appointment of not being with her father and not being in the midst of the gaiety of Charleston caused her to be increasingly distressed. Her unhappiness troubled Joseph, who questioned if it might not be more advisable to change their plans and join the other members of his sizable family for Christmas after all. He was disturbed that Theodosia suffered unreasonable longing for her father, but Theo never mentioned that she also suffered lapses of memory and sharp pains in her head from time to time. She hid this from him in an effort not to further burden him. She did not comprehend why she should at times suffer a peculiar feeling of detachment as well as a conflict of wills struggling within her own mind. She was certain she could never make Joseph understand these things, yet she knew her father would. Theo cherished his letters, her only contact with him, and when too long a time passed without hearing from him, she drew forth a pile, neatly bound with white ribbon, and would unbind them and read them again.

He said that the winter in Washington was proving more pleasant than he had anticipated. Although he had been ill received upon his return to the capitol city, his good friends, James and Dolley Madison, had taken pity on his situation and invited him to their home on several occasions. Their social acceptance of him had a marked effect on other former friends. Within a few short days, Albert Gallatin invited him to dine in one of the city's leading taverns, where they were seen by a large number of society. Only recently, President Jefferson invited him to dine at the President's House. All appeared to be well with the outgoing Vice-President. No one mentioned Alexander Hamilton to him, and he studiously avoided discussing politics in public. An apparently happy and amiable plateau had been reached. Only once since his return to the Senate rostrum had there been any unpleasantness. When he had come forward in the Senate to resume his place as the president of that body, Senator William Plumer grew outraged at what he considered the brazen effrontery of the act. He rose from his seat to declare that this was the first time a murderer had ever presided over the Senate, and he prayed to the Almighty

that the United States would never again suffer such a disgrace. As Plumer resumed his seat, many of his colleagues applauded him. Aaron Burr made no comment but coolly looked about him at the Senators thus engaged. He could count at least a dozen among them who had also defended their honor by means of a duel, but the difference was one of notoriety. The man he had killed had thereby become a national hero. That was a claim none other could make. He was struck with the hypocrisy of the situation, and a sardonic smile spread over his face as he rapped the gavel in an effort to restore order to the chamber. Theodosia was certain that had she been present, she would have used the gavel to rap their heads.

The sounds of happy childish laughter roused Theodosia from her reverie. She looked about her and found, to her amazement, that she had wandered in a circle about the house and was now behind it. There in front of her beneath two giant oak trees was little Aaron with "Old Maum" Annette. They sat together on the joggling board, bouncing up and down to the accompaniment of Gampy's squeals of laughter.

Seeing his mother, Gampy called, "Mommy, look, I can bounce, I can bounce. Look at me."

"Be careful, darling. Don't fall off," she called back to him, but her words were drowned in the happy giggling of her child. She watched him in satisfaction for a few minutes. He was growing rapidly now. He would be a tall, handsome young man one day, very much like his father. Too soon he would be grown and no longer her spoiled little darling. The prospect of it only added to her melancholy, and she longed to smother him with love and kisses, to keep him forever with her, forever her wee treasure, her baby. When he was grown there would be no more babies, no more to come after him. She knew they would not. When she was young and dreamed of marrying, she thought to have at least half a dozen babies, all pink and round and cuddly, but now her dream world had vanished, and in the real one she occupied, there would be no more babies for her, only little Aaron. In those rare moments she allowed herself to think of it, she sorrowed for Joseph, who so loved Gampy. He was meant to have many chil-

dren. He was capable of loving many. He had the means to provide for many. She knew that it would be possible for Joseph to have more, but not with her. The birth of little Aaron had nearly caused her death, had left her sickly and weak. She had been informed that another child would most assuredly mean her death. What a cruel trick for fate to play on her dear Joseph. Yet, he never complained of it. He adored her and Gampy, and they filled his life. He spoiled the boy most shamefully. Gampy returned his father's love with a kind of true worship.

His grandfather set impossibly high standards for the education of little "Gamp," and though she meant to, Theodosia could not bring herself to adhere too strictly to the schedule. He was a child and should have time to play and enjoy life before he was forced to suffer its hardships, disciplines, and privations. If he could not yet read, it was no matter, Theodosia enjoyed reading to him. Those were moments of closeness treasured by both, and she was reluctant to forgo them.

"Mommy, come and bounce with me," Gampy called to her, at last breaking through her thoughts to make himself heard.

"Oh, darling, I'm too big to bounce. I'd most likely break your joggling board," she told him as she walked toward him.

"Maum Annette doesn't break it, and she bounces with me. She's bigger than you are, too," he replied sensibly.

"That's true, Miz Alston. I's lots bigger than you." Maum Annette chuckled. "But if you're gonna git on, then I better git myself right off. For sure the two of us together would break the board." And off she climbed.

The joggling board was merely a plank of pine supported at each end by other boards to brace it. This allowed the board to bounce up and down when someone sat or jumped on it. Little Aaron was not allowed to jump on the board as some of the negro children loved to do. He was still too small and not well coordinated enough to respond to the rhythmic up-and-down movements of the board. Somehow he always came down at the wrong time and lost his balance, tumbling to the ground. But sitting on the board, he was too light to make it bounce by him-

self and required a partner. One of the problems of being the only child in a family was that there were many things you could not do by yourself. Theodosia sat beside her small son on the board. She took his hand in hers and placed her feet firmly on the ground, then she gave a hard thrust downward with her body. Little Aaron bounced into the air nearly an inch off the board; the sudden movement both frightened and delighted him. He began to laugh anew. Theo continued to rock on the board for nearly ten minutes. Then she could exert herself no more. She was exhausted from the effort.

"That's enough now, darling. Mommy's tired," she told her son.

"No, no. Bounce some more. I want to bounce some more, mommy," he pleaded.

"But I can't, dear. I'm too tired to bounce anymore today. Perhaps we will tomorrow if you like," she told him.

"I'm really not feeling well enough to do anymore today."

"Are you sick, mommy?" He climbed down from the board and put his head in her lap. "I don't want you to be sick. I don't like it when you're sick."

"Oh, darling, neither do I," she answered, embracing the small boy. In silence they remained wrapped in this filial embrace. Theodosia gently kissed the top of his curly head and lifted his chin so that she could gaze at the face she loved so well. "Aaron," she said, "will you do something for me?"

"If you wish it, momma," he answered.

"Will you remember always that I love you very much? Try to understand that I won't always be with you, but even when I am not, I shall love you, forever and ever and ever. Will you remember?"

"Yes, momma," he replied with such simplicity that she could not hold back the tears glistening in her eyes. She knelt in front of him and drew him close to her.

"Oh, my darling, my darling," she whispered, giving no sign of loosing her hold.

Drawing away from her a little, her son inquired, "Mommy, are you *very* ill?" There was a small frown on his face.

Theodosia made her best effort to reassure him with a

smile, but it was weak and pale. She hoped he wouldn't notice that it was forced. "No, my dear. I think only a *little*, a very little." Then she added quickly, "But I'm *very* unhappy. I'm so sorry that you will be missing all the gay parties and the celebrations and happy times of the Christmas season with your cousins and aunts and uncles and all your friends in Charleston this year. It doesn't seem right that you must miss it all because I'm not well."

"I won't mind, truly, mother." His earnest little face wore an expression too serious for his tender years.

"If you would like to go, I'm sure you could stay with Grandfather and Grandmother Alston. They would be very happy to receive you. They love you too, dear. And I think I could convince papa that it would be a good thing." She could not imagine why this simple solution had not occurred to her before now. It might be that she so fervently hoped to be recovered in time for all three of them to be able to spend Christmas in Charleston, but it was no longer important. Now that the idea had come to her, there was still time to send little Aaron to his grandparents, already at their home on King Street.

"I don't want to go. I would rather be with you and papa for Christmas time. I truly would. Grandfather and Grandmother Alston have so many grandchildren that they would never miss just one, but you have only me—and if I weren't here, wouldn't you miss me?" he asked.

"Oh yes, my darling. Yes, I would miss you very much," she told him, clutching his small hands in hers.

"Then you wouldn't be happy at Christmas time, and if I knew you weren't happy, I wouldn't be happy either. I don't mind not going to the parties," he insisted soberly. "But mayn't we have a party here—just you and me and papa?"

"We shall have a glorious party—the three of us, a perfectly grand party, darling. We shall decorate the house with greens and have a huge tree and hundreds of white candles and all the sweet things to eat that you would like—and presents, too. It will be the most glorious party anyone ever had. Does that sound gay, my treasure?"

"I would like that far better than going to Charleston alone, mama," he nodded. "May I help to decorate the tree?"

"We shall all three do it, my dear," she said. "We shall have a marvelous Christmas here, I'll see to it. You know, Gampy, one time for my birthday, your Grandfather Burr gave a party, but I wasn't there. I was here with your father. So, he took my portrait and sat it on a chair at the place of honor at the table, and everyone sang to my portrait and toasted my health just as if I were truly present. Why don't we do that with your grandfather's portrait? It will be almost as if he were with us."

"Yes, let's do that, and will you write him to tell him what we did?"

"Oh, indeed, I shall. He'll be quite pleased, I think."

"And can I sit beside him?"

"I think he would like that very much," she approved.

"When shall we start to decorate the house? I want to see it—and my tree. When will we put up my tree?"

"Aren't you a greedy young man. It shall be OUR tree. Let's ask papa tonight when he thinks we might have a tree cut down and brought to the house. I think it will be most likely next week."

"I like that. Then next week I will not do my studies. We will be too busy preparing for Christmas and our party."

"You are certainly a trickster, young Master Alston," his mother teased. "I think you are anxious to have a grand Christmas only to get out of your studies." She kissed his soft cheek and released his hands. "You must be hungry after all that play. Maum Annette will take you back to the house for something to eat."

He turned and ran to Maum Annette, who was standing patiently near the giant oak tree. She had watched the scene between mother and child with great understanding. Now she took little Aaron's hand but did not move toward the house. Instead, she waited to see if Theodosia intended to return with them. Theodosia stood but made no effort to move from where she was.

"Miz Alston," said Maum Annette, "are you all right? Can I fetch you something?"

Theodosia looked at the dark-skinned woman with the gentle face so full of wisdom that comes only from having experienced suffering and witnessed the suffering of others.

"No, Maum Annette, thank you." She raised her hand to brush away a lock of hair that had fallen over her brow.

"Shall I help you back to the house? You look sick, Miz Alston."

"No, I love the freshness here . . . the trees and the sky and the open space. I love the look of the garden. I want to stay awhile longer here."

"It's not good to stay too long. You wear yourself out, you know that," Maum Annette cautioned.

"I won't stay too long, Maum Annette, just a little more. You take little Aaron to the house and find him some bread and fresh butter. I'll be in soon," she replied.

Slowly she turned and began to walk again. She was tired and felt older than her twenty years. She thought often of death and dying these last few weeks. It seemed to haunt her. She could not fathom the reason why it should be so, but it disturbed her greatly. She did not look forward to dying. All that she cherished so dearly made her desperate to cling to life as tenaciously as she could. Dying was abhorrent to her. This was another of the thoughts she had not dared to mention to Joseph. It would upset him beyond necessity. He was now so concerned, so involved with establishing his own political career as a member of the lower house in the South Carolina legislature. She was very proud of Joseph and his interest in politics and so was her father. When the time came that her father was ready to establish his own empire, Joseph would be an invaluable aid to him. Theodosia found her thoughts of death disturbing in relation to her father's plan as well. A new country would not need an ill princess. She must be well and strong in order to be a source of pride for her father. She would put all thoughts of death out of her mind—she must. She must not dwell on them, only on a heartening recovery. Her father must be satisfied and complemented by her presence. She must be his prime supporter in all his endeavors. Had

her mother lived, she would have been the principal support of such a man, but since the death of her mother, that banner had fallen to Theodosia, and she never failed to support it in good faith. She must not fail him now when his need of her was great.

A wave of exhaustion overtook Theodosia. Abruptly she stopped her strolling and sank to the grass beside the path. She stared out over the garden through which she had been aimlessly wandering. No true Northerner would have believed it Christmas, she thought, sighing, viewing the japonica, the pansies, the daffodils, the golden fluff balls of the opopanax trees, and the ever-abundant and pungent camellias. She reached out her hand and plucked a pink one from its stem. She raised it to her face to inhale the sweet odor. For some reason, the odor brought to mind a funeral procession—again thoughts of death. I'm only being morbid, she thought, tossing the blossom angrily away from her. She began to weep. I don't want to die, but I fear I haven't the strength to continue living—I don't want to die. The ground is so cold and unfriendly. I don't want to be buried deep in the ground with the cold, unfeeling earth all around me. Oh, why, why, must I continue to think of it?

She took no notice of when the weeping stopped abruptly. She was aware only that the garden seemed to be receding, fading, mingling with a rolling, misty fog, which was overtaking it. Seated on the ground as she was, she did not fall but merely slumped forward into an inert heap, covered by her cape as she lapsed into an unconscious state. As she did so, Percy felt a desperate surge from within. She was frightened. Something was wrong, dreadfully wrong. "Damon, Damon, help me. I need you," she pleaded, but the only answer came on the late-afternoon breeze as a mocking bird called in the distance. Other than the distant sound of its call, all was peaceful and still around her. The squirrels still scampered up and down the branches of the old oak trees, carrying acorns to store away for the winter. They did not stop in their chores, even to investigate the brown lump on the otherwise green lawn. All of nature was oblivious to her presence, all of life continued to move in its tranquil pat-

tern about her. For nearly two hours she lay on the ground until Joseph came in search of her. Old Maum Annette told him, when he returned home, that Miz Alston had gone for a walk in the back garden and was probably still there. When he came upon her, she had not moved from the spot where she had collapsed. She was such a pathetic sight, so helpless, almost deathlike in her stillness. He lifted her gently in his arms and placed his cheek against her forehead. It was surprisingly warm and moist. She was more ill than he had believed or than she would admit. As quickly as he could move without jarring her, he carried her back to the house. When he reached the porch, he began to call for Steven. In answer to his call, the negro servant opened the front door.

"Quickly ride into Charleston and bring back Dr. Pringle. Mrs. Alston is ill," he ordered.

"Yessuh, Mr. Alston, I'll be glad to do that, if you want me to. But if you want someone who can ride in a hurry, you should send Byrn. He's the best horse rider on this whole plantation," Steven suggested.

"Then, send Byrn. Find him immediately," said Joseph. He gave the orders in clipped, brief spurts. The negro servant was not disturbed by the sharpness in his master's voice. He had known Joseph since he was a boy growing up in the home of his father's plantation, Clifton. They were friends then, and Joseph insisted on bringing Steven with him to The Oaks when he was married. They were friends still. Joseph was a kind and considerate master. He treated his slaves well and was mindful of their welfare. He felt an enormous responsibility toward them and they, in turn, felt gratitude for his concern. They realized they were fortunate to be on a plantation owned by one of the Alstons. Steven knew that the brusqueness of manner was caused by worry over his ill wife and not because Joseph enjoyed making his slaves feel inferior as some of the nearby plantation owners did.

Steven found Byrn in the stables, feeding the horses their final meal of the day. "Byrn, Master Joseph says for you to hightail it off to Charleston. He says you find Dr. Pringle and bring him back here fast. Mind you don't come back without him. Miz Alston's mighty sick. She

need that doctor right away." Steven embellished the orders a bit to impress urgency upon Byrn.

Byrn made no reply. He merely nodded his head and took Rounder from his stall. Rounder was the fastest horse in the stables, and Byrn meant to ride like the wind to bring Dr. Pringle back for Mrs. Alston. Without a word, he galloped out of the stables and down the road to Charleston as fast as Rounder could move.

"Suzette," Joseph called from the stairs. Without waiting for a reply, he called again. "Suzette!" Up the steps behind him rushed Theodosia's personal maid, Suzette. Shortly after Theodosia arrived at The Oaks, her father had sent her a thoughtful gift of nuts, apples, and a chambermaid, Suzette. Suzette was twenty-three when she arrived in South Carolina, only slightly older than her mistress. She was intelligent and accomplished. They became devoted in a very short time. Like everyone else, Suzette had been won by Theo's beauty of manner as well as face and figure, and it distressed her unduly when Theo was indisposed. She tried constantly to help Theodosia overcome her recent spell of melancholy but with seemingly little effect. It had not occurred to her that her young mistress was seriously ill and in danger of collapse. At the sight of Theodosia lying limp and pale in Joseph's arms, Suzette drew a sharp breath. She was stricken with remorse for not having discerned the serious nature of the illness.

"Oh, m'sieu, what has happened?" she asked, following Joseph closely, trying to peer into Theo's face, half hidden by the cape she wore.

"I don't know, Suzette, but she is burning with fever. Please bring a basin of cool water and some clean cloths to her room and help me bathe her head," he instructed her.

"Yes, M'sieu Joseph," she replied as she reversed her direction and started down the stairs.

"Hurry, Suzette . . . And you may also bring a decanter of brandy for Mrs. Alston," he added.

"Yes, m'sieu," she replied. She started to continue down the steps but paused to ask, "Should I find Maum Annette to help with Mrs. Alston?"

"No, no . . . not yet, at any rate. I've sent for Dr. Pringle. I think she will require medical attention, not the superstitious mumbo-jumbo practiced by the natives. You need not tell them I said that, however," he told her.

"Very well, m'sieu. I hope Dr. Pringle will be hasty to arrive." She was now at the foot of the stairs and on her way to the kitchen for a basin of water and the cloths he requested.

Joseph placed his wife tenderly on the bed and removed her cumbersome cape. He placed her shoes beside the foot of the bed and again felt her brow. Was it his imagination or was it warmer than before? He could not be sure, but it was far warmer than it should be, at any rate. His experience with illness was limited; such things were undertaken by the women of the house when necessary, but he intended to allow no one to minister to his wife save himself, with the help of Suzette—and Dr. Pringle, of course. He was not positive that the cool cloths applied to her face would be of benefit, but it seemed the sensible thing to do. He had little if any faith in the voodoo medicine practiced by the old native women and felt that more harm than good might come from turning his wife's care over to them. He must find some way to help her until Dr. Pringle arrived. He cursed himself for not taking the time to write a short note to the doctor explaining the symptoms Theo suffered, that the doctor might be certain to have with him the medicine to treat her illness. It did not occur to him at the time, only speed had seemed important. He would have to leave to fate and the long years of practice in Dr. Pringle's career what medicines Dr. Pringle would carry with him to The Oaks.

Joseph was seated beside his wife, considering whether or not he should attempt to exchange her restrictive clothing for a more suitable sleeping garment, when Suzette appeared at the door. It could wait, he decided, until he had bathed her face with some cold water. In his haste to minister to his wife, he splashed water over himself and onto the floor. As he dipped the cloth a second time into the cool water, he again splashed himself. Suzette, all pa-

tience and sympathy, reached out her hand and took the cloth from him.

"I will do that, if you will allow me, m'sieu," she told him.

Gratefully, he released the cloth into her hand. "Thank you, Suzette," he murmured.

Quickly and expertly, Suzette dipped the cloth into the water, held it up and squeezed from it the excess liquid. She folded it neatly into a small square and bathed Theodosia's fevered face very gently with the cool cloth; then she placed it on her forehead. She took another cloth from the pile and followed the same ritual, placing the second cloth on the sleeping woman's right cheek. A third cloth she placed on the left cheek. Then she removed the first cloth from Theodosia's forehead, refreshed it in the cool water and replaced it to its rightful position. She followed this ritual in a slow and steady round perhaps a dozen times. Then she felt the water with her hand.

"I must fetch some fresh water, M'sieu Alston. It is no longer cool. Will you sit beside her while I do so? She may roll from side to side as she awakens, and we would not wish her to fall to the floor." Suzette stood up, picked up the partially emptied basin, and left the room.

Joseph, feeling helpless and awkward, sat quietly beside his wife, a worried frown on his face as he watched her. His hand rested lightly on her arm. As he watched, she began to stir ever so slightly. Her head turned from side to side as if to shake off the damp cloths. Joseph did not disturb her. He could not determine whether it would be helpful to speak to her or whether he should wait for her to open her eyes. He suspected it might be well simply to wait until she revived by herself before attempting to speak with her, but he could not bear the anxiety.

"Theo, darling—please, Theo, open your eyes. You will be well, now. I've sent for Dr. Pringle. Byrn has ridden to fetch him. It will be another few hours before they have returned, but Suzette and I will care for you, never fear. Please open your eyes, my dearest," he coaxed.

Her eyelids fluttered briefly but closed again. A spasm of pain caused her to grimace, but it was only a fleeting momentary frown. She seemed to make an attempt to lift

her hand, but the effort was too great for her. She let it drop again. Then as he watched, she appeared about to fall again into the deep sleep she had just left, but her lips parted, and with some difficulty she opened her eyes. "I'm so hot, so very hot," she said. "Please give me something cool to drink. I'm consumed with the heat." At first, she did not seem to recognize the room or her husband. Her eyes appeared to be clouded over with pain, and she was unable to focus her vision. With considerable strain, she forced herself to concentrate on the figure beside her on the bed, frowning as she did so. It seemed ages that she lay staring hard at her husband with only a blank, suspicious expression before recognition came to her. Then a smile, weak but endearing, spread across her face.

"Joseph, my dearest Joseph. Do you truly know that I love you with all my being?" Her voice was low as she spoke. She did not complain of being ill or in pain, but her first thought was to comfort him.

He was at a loss for words to comfort her. "I know, my dearest Theo, I know" was all he could think to respond.

"I am so sorry to be ill, Joseph. How I long to be well for your sake—and for little Gampy," she whispered hoarsely.

"You are not to worry about us, my darling. Only try to be well for your own sake. That is our wish, both Gamp and me," he told her.

Suzette entered the room with a basin of fresh cool water, setting it on the table beside the bed. When she saw that Theodosia was somewhat revived, she smiled. "You are feeling better, Mrs. Alston? Perhaps a little?" she inquired.

Theodosia did not answer, merely shook her head slightly. "Won't you please get me a glass of cool water, I'm so very very hot. I feel I'm being burned by fire," she requested, looking from one to the other.

"Certainly, madame, I will fetch you a glass of water as cold as I can find, but you must promise only to sip at it," Suzette replied.

"Yes, yes, I will," Theodosia promised.

"I will bring the water, Suzette. You may stay and

sponge her face. That will help her to feel more comfortable," Joseph volunteered.

"And would you bring me some ice, please, dear?" requested the ill woman.

"Some ice, Theo?" Joseph stared at his wife in puzzlement.

"Yes, please bring some ice in the glass," she said irritably.

"Where would I get ice, Theo?" He and Suzette exchanged glances which spoke of bewilderment and alarm.

"From the ice-maker, where else?" It was the mind of Percy speaking through the haze of fever and semidelirium which clutched it.

"You know where to find the ice. Please don't play games with me. I need ice water," she pleaded.

"Yes, of course, Theo, of course. I'll hurry." Joseph cast a final worried glance toward Suzette, who resumed bathing her mistress's head with the cool cloths. He only hoped that Theodosia did not take an abrupt turn for the worse before Dr. Pringle arrived.

The night was long and difficult for the members of the household. Little Aaron was upset that he was not allowed to give his mother her customary good-night kiss, but his father finally explained to his satisfaction that Mama was ill and needed to sleep undisturbed. In the morning Gampy would be allowed to give her two kisses to make up for the one he must forgo. Joseph lifted his son in his arms and carried him pickaback to the little boy's bedroom. There he tucked him in and sat beside his bed, telling stories until little Aaron fell asleep. When the boy was soundly slumbering, Joseph tiptoed out of the room and back to the bedside of his wife. Maum Annette was seated outside her door, patiently waiting for him.

"I can help Miz Alston get rid of the fever," she told him.

"I know you wish to help, Maum Annette, but I've sent Byrn to bring back Dr. Pringle. He will know what to do for Mrs. Alston," Joseph explained.

"My help is better," answered Maum Annette. "I cut the pain with a knife. Only that can drive the fire from her head."

"Mrs. Alston was raised in the North, Maum Annette. She has no faith in your kind of medicine. It frightens her. She trusts Dr. Pringle. We'll wait for him to arrive." He dismissed her with a wave of his hand and returned to his wife's side. Faithful Suzette was still soothing her and applying fresh cloths to her forehead and cheeks. She wiped her mouth with a clean white cloth dipped in cool water in an attempt to ease Theo's endless thirst.

"Is she any improved, Suzette?" he asked as he entered the room.

"I think perhaps a little, m'sieu. Her fever does not seem so much now, but her mind still wanders. She talks of things I do not understand. I am frightened. M'sieu Alston. I've heard that sometimes in a fever the mind wanders and does not return—ever." Her hand trembled as she spoke of it.

"That will not happen to Mrs. Alston, Suzette. She will recover. She has been ill before and always recovered from it." He felt the need to persuade himself as much as Suzette.

"Yes, m'sieu, but she has never an illness like this—her mind seems to be far off. I know I should not speak of this thing to you, M'sieu Alston, but I knew a young girl one time whose mind wandered away and never returned to her—still has not, I fear. Her father was killed in a duel, and she could not bear the grief. She is like a beautiful child who knows nothing."

"You speak of Angelica Hamilton, I presume, Suzette?"

"Yes, m'sieu. It is she." Suzette nodded.

"But this is not the same, Suzette. It was the great shock and sorrow of her loss that caused the distress of that young lady. Theodosia has suffered no such shock and pain. She is merely ill," he replied.

"I know, m'sieu. It only occurred to me that the Creator in some manner of retribution might claim the mind of M'sieu Burr's daughter in return for the mind of M'sieu Hamilton's daughter. Fate often moves in such a pattern," she uttered pensively.

The thought was an unpleasant one for Joseph. Such

things did happen, but he preferred not to consider it at the moment.

"But, Suzette, I thought you were fond of Mr. Burr," Joseph objected.

"I am, m'sieu, I am. But that does not mean I must always approve of his actions." Her eyes confirmed the truth of her simple reply.

"No, I suppose not. We don't always have to approve of his actions. Only dear Theodosia does that without question. How fortunate he is to have such a daughter," Joseph remarked half to Suzette and half to himself.

The time seemed vacant and endless. How he wished Byrn and Dr. Pringle would arrive. He walked to the window and drew back the curtain, hoping to see them riding up to the house, but he knew they would not—not yet. "I do hope Dr. Pringle realized that he should come on horseback. It will be much easier and faster than if he were to use a gig."

The night was almost over when Dr. Pringle at last reached The Oaks. Joseph and Suzette, alternately and together, did their best to explain to Dr. Pringle the symptoms and manner of Theodosia's indisposition. He examined her carefully, but could find no reason for her collapse. It could be that it was connected to the problem she suffered with her uterus. He administered laudanum for her pain and encouraged both Suzette and Joseph to leave Theodosia in his care so that they might rest a few hours. Suzette was happy to comply with his suggestion, for she was very weary and knew that the morrow would be a busy one for her. Joseph demurred, preferring to remain with his wife in the event of her worsening during the early morning. Even if he were to retire, he would not be able to woo sleep knowing that his wife was dangerously ill.

Somehow, Suzette had managed to change Theodosia from her blue wool dress into a soft rose night dress. The abundant red-brown hair lay in ringlets on the pillow, framing her ashen white face in a sea of tight curls, made even more so by the dampness of her head. The two white candles, one on each side of her bed cast flickering shadows across her face. The whole impression made

Joseph remember the funeral of his aunt, Alma, with tall white tapers on each side of her coffin. Joseph extinguished the candles. The two men remained by the bedside in the darkness, waiting for a movement, a word, a sign of recovery—or failure—on the part of the occupant. In the dawning, stillness fell over the house and the grounds surrounding it. Life and time seemed in agreement to stop their onrushing course. Everything seemed to hang in suspension, waiting, waiting, waiting.

Percy Brooks stirred, her eyelids fluttered open once, twice, then with some difficulty she managed to open them and to keep them open, long enough to look about her. The room was strange, she didn't recognize where she was. She stared at the arm, wrapped and bound to a board to keep the intravenous needle from being pulled loose inadvertently. She viewed it in a curious, detached manner. The arm had no relationship to her. It meant nothing. Her body had no relationship to her. Only pain had meaning, an indescribable, all-consuming, blinding pain, which spread in a network throughout her body and met again in one concentrated crush in her head, somewhere deep within her head. She closed her eyes and frowned, hoping the strain might serve to banish some of the agony. It was a wasted effort, and she opened them again. There were sounds around her, but she could see no one, and the effort to lift her head was beyond her power. Where was she? What was happening to her?

"Help me." She spoke the words weakly, not loud enough to be heard above the subdued noise outside her small cubicle. Gathering all her strength, she tried again. "Help me, please. Somebody, help me," she called.

Passing outside the drapery which outlined Percy's allotted space, the nurse stopped. It was the first sound to come from this patient in the three days she had been in the IC unit. Pulling aside the curtain to peer at the patient in the bed, the nurse was startled to see Percy struggling to raise her head.

"No, no, don't try to sit up. You're much too sick for that. Just lie down and tell me what you want." In an instant, she was beside Percy, her arms on Percy's shoul-